A Mystery Story for Girls

The Crimson Thread

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Adventure Stories for Girls

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By
ROY J. SNELL

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THE CRIMSON THREAD

CHAPTER I

TWO HOURS BEFORE MIDNIGHT

Starting back with a suppressed exclamation of surprise on her lips, Lucile Tucker stared in mystification and amazement. What was this ghost-like apparition that had appeared at the entrance to the long dark passage-way? A young woman's face, a face of beauty and refinement, surrounded by a perfect circle of white. In the almost complete darkness of the place, that was all Lucile could see. And such a place for such a face — the far corner of the third floor of one of the largest department stores in the world. At that very moment, from somewhere out of the darkness, came the slow, deep, chiming notes of a great clock telling off the hour of ten. Two hours before midnight! And she, Lucile, was

for a moment alone; or at least up to this moment she had thought herself alone.

What was she to make of the face? True, it was on the level with the top of the wrapper's desk. That, at least, was encouraging.

"That white is a fox skin, the collar to some dark garment that blends completely with the shadows," Lucile told herself reassuringly.

At that moment a startling question sent her shrinking farther into the shadows. "If she's a real person and not a spectre, what is she doing here? Here, of all places, at the hour of ten!"

That was puzzling. What had this lady been doing in that narrow passage? She could not be a member of the working force of the store. No sales person would come to work in such a superb garment as this person wore. Although Lucile had been employed in the book department for but ten days, she had seen all those who worked here and was certain enough that no such remarkably beautiful face could have escaped her notice.

"She — why she might be anything," Lucile told herself. "A — thief — a shoplifter. Perhaps she stole that very cape — or whatever it is she wears. Perhaps — "

Suddenly her heart gave a leap. Footsteps were approaching. The next instant she saw a second face appear in the narrow line of light which the street lights cast through the window.

"Laurie Seymour," she breathed.

Laurie was the new man in the department. He had been working at the boys' and girls' books for only three days, yet Lucile liked him, liked him tremendously. He was so friendly, even-tempered and different. And he seemed a trifle mysterious.

"Mysterious," she mused, "perhaps here's the mystery answered."

It certainly did seem so, for after the apparition in white had whispered a word or two, Larry looked at her strangely for a second, drew from his pocket a slip of paper and handing it to her, quickly vanished into the shadows. The next instant the apparition vanished, too. Again

Lucile found herself alone in the far corner of the mammoth store, surrounded by darkness.

Perhaps you have been wondering what Lucile and Laurie were doing in the great store at this hour. Since the doors are closed at six o'clock, you have no doubt thought of the entire place as being shrouded in darkness and utterly deserted. These were the days of the great rush of sales that comes before Christmas. That evening eight thousand books had been trucked into the department to be stowed away on or under tables and shelves. Twenty sales persons had been given "pass outs"; which meant that they might pass *in* at seven o'clock and work until ten. They had worked like beavers; making ready for the rush that would come on the morrow.

Now the great bulk of the work had been done. More than half of the workers had chirped a cheery "Good-night" and had found their way down a marble stairway to the ground floor and the street. Lucile had been sent by "Rennie," the head sales-lady of juveniles, to this dark sec-

tion for an armful of books. Here in this dark corner a part of Laurie's true character had, uninvited, come to her.

"He gave her his pass-out," she said to herself. "With that she can leave the building with her stolen goods."

For a second, as she thought of this, she contemplated following the mystery woman and bringing her back.

"But that," she told herself, "would be dangerous. That passage is a hundred feet long and only four feet wide; then it turns sharply and goes two hundred feet farther. She may carry a knife; such women do. In that place she could murder me and no one would know until morning.

"Of course," she reflected, "there's the other end of the passage where it comes out at the offices. She must leave the passage there if she does not come back this way. I might call the watchmen. They could catch her. It's a perfect trap; she's like a mouse in a boot. But then — "

She paused in her mad rush of thought. What proof had she that this beautiful creature was a thief? What indeed? And what right had she to spy upon her and upon Laurie? Truth was, she had none at all. She was a sales person, not a detective. Her job was that of putting books on shelves and tables and selling them; her immediate task that of taking an armful of books to Rennie. Her simple and sole duty lay just there. Then, too, in the short time she had known Laurie Seymour, she had come to like him.

"He might be innocent of any real wrong," she reasoned. "If I go blundering into things I may be serving a friend badly indeed."

"But," she was brought up short by a sudden thought, "if he gave her his pass-out, how's he to leave the building?"

How indeed? In a great store such as this, where hundreds of thousands of dollars worth of rare jewels and much silver and gold are kept and where princely furs and priceless old paintings are on display, it is necessary to maintain

a constant vigil against thieves. "Pass-outs" are given to all employees who enter or leave the store after closing hours. It was true enough that without his pass-out, Laurie could not get by the eagle-eyed guard who kept constant vigil at the only door where the employees were permitted to pass out to the street.

"But the books," she murmured, starting up, "Rennie will be waiting."

Rennie, who real name was Miss Renton, appeared to be in no hurry. Having become interested in writing down lists of books that were to be ordered in the morning, she had so far forgotten the girl as to exclaim as she came up:

"Why, Lucile! I thought you had gone! Now, dearie, just put those books down right there. We can take care of them before the rush begins in the morning. Run along now and get your coat. You must go home. It's past ten, less than two hours till midnight!"

"Yes, but —"

Lucile checked herself just in time. She had been about to say that she was afraid to go for

her coat. And indeed she was, for was it not hanging on the wall in that narrow passage at the door of which the mystery lady had appeared?

"But it wouldn't do to tell," she thought, "I — I've got to go alone."

Go she did, but with much fear and trembling.

She might have spared herself all this trembling, for there was no one in the dark passage.

But what was this? The row of coat hooks were all empty save one, her own, and on that hook — what could it mean? — on that hook hung not her own too frankly thin and threadbare coat, but a magnificent thing of midnight blue and white. It was the cape with the white fox collar worn by the mystery woman.

Even as her hand touched the fox skin she knew it was far more costly than she had thought.

"It's over my coat," she breathed. "I've only to leave it."

This, she found, was not true. *Her coat had vanished.* The cape had been left in its stead and, as if to further perplex and alarm her, the

midnight blue unfolded, revealing a superb lining of Siberian squirrel.

"Oh!" Lucile exclaimed as her trembling fingers dropped to her side and she fled the place.

One consoling thought flashed across her mind. Rennie had not yet left for the night. Rennie, the tall and slim, with a thread of gray in her black hair, who had been in the department for no one knew how long — Rennie would know what to do. The instant she was told all that had happened she would say what the very next step must be.

"The instant she is told," Lucile whispered to herself. Then suddenly she realized that she did not wish to tell all she had seen.

"Not just yet, at any rate," she told herself. "I'm not supposed to have seen it. I want time to think. I'll tell Rennie only what I am supposed to know — that my coat has been taken and this cape left in its stead."

Rennie showed little surprise on hearing the story. "Someone has probably taken the wrong coat," she said.

"But that's not possible!" Lucile laughed at the very thought.

"Why?"

"I'll show you," and she dashed back for the cape.

As Rennie saw the magnificent creation, she gasped with astonishment; then began to murmur something about fairy princesses looking after poor girls and leaving them gorgeous garments.

"You can't go home without a wrap," she told Lucile. "They say there's a regular blizzard outside. You'll simply have to wear it home."

Taking the garment from Lucile's hands, she placed it upon her shoulders with a touch that was half caress. Then, having fastened it under Lucile's chin, she stood back to exclaim:

"Why, dearie, you look charming!"

"But —but how am I to get out of the building with it? No one will believe that a mere sales girl owns a cape like this. It's new. Probably it's been stolen."

"Stolen!" exclaimed Rennie. "What nonsense!

"Besides," she added in a quieter tone, "it's not quite new. The strings that hold it together at the throat are worn a little smooth and there's the least bit of a soil at the bottom. You wait ten minutes for me and we'll go out together. I know the watchman. I'll take you out under my wing."

Greatly relieved by these words and intent on making the most of her wait by having a good general look at the room, Lucile sauntered away to the left where she was soon lost from sight behind tables, stacks of books, and massive pillars.

Since she had worked here but ten days, the charm of the place had not yet worn off. The books, row on row of them, fascinated her. Here was a wealth of learning that no one could hope to appropriate in a lifetime. To the right of her was poetry, thousands of volumes; to the left, books on travel, thousands more; and before her new fiction, tens of thousands. Who

would not envy her? It was a great place for one who loved books.

With a feeling of sorrow she thought of the time when she must leave all this wealth; when she must say goodbye to the wonderful friends she had already formed here. In two short weeks she would be going back to the University. Since she was dependent upon her own resources for her support — and since for one who specialized in English there was quite as much to be learned about books by selling as by reading them — her head professor had quite readily granted her a month's leave of absence that she might come down here to assist in meeting the Christmas rush.

"Ah yes," she breathed, " it will be of the past in two more weeks. But in two weeks much may happen. Think of what happened to-night! Think — "

She was brought up short by a sound. Had it been a footstep? She could not make sure for the floor was heavily carpeted. Instantly she became conscious of the darkness that sur-

rounded her like a shroud. Before her loomed the dim outlines of the elevator cages. Distorted by the uncertain light, these seemed the cells of some gloomy prison. Far off to the right was a great rotunda. From the rail that surrounded this, when the lights were on, one might gaze upward to dizzy heights and downward to dizzier depths. Now she thought of that awe inspiring vault as if it were some deep and mysterious cave.

"Oh — ooo!" Lucile gasped. "This place gets spookier every moment. I'll go back to — "

Even as she spoke she caught a sound to her right. Impelled by sheer curiosity, she took a dozen steps in that direction.

Suddenly she started back. Against the wall a light had flashed on for a second and in that second she had caught sight of a face — the face of Laurie Seymour.

Again the light came on. This time the flash was a little longer. She saw his face clearly. On his finely cut features there was such a smile as suggests anticipation of amusing adventure.

In one hand he held the flash-light. Under his arm was a bundle of corrugated paper such as is used in wrapping books for mailing. He was standing by a square opening in the wall. Lucile knew in a vague sort of way where that opening led. Books that had been wrapped were dropped in there. A circular spiral chute, some three feet in diameter, wormed its way like an auger hole down from this point to the sub-basement where was located the shipping room.

Even as she thought this through she saw Laurie swing his feet across the opening. Then, just as the light flashed out, she again saw that amused grin. The next second there came the sound of some heavy object gliding downward.

"He — he went down the chute!" she gasped. "He'll be killed!"

How long she stood there, petrified with surprise and dread, she could not have told. It could not have been many seconds but it seemed an hour. At last the end came, a sickening thud sounding faint and far away.

Without uttering a sound, but with heart beat-

ing wildly and feet flying at almost superhuman speed, the girl raced across the room and down a flight of broad marble stairs.

"I must find him. He is hurt. Perhaps he is killed!" she kept repeating to herself.

Down one flight; down two; three; four, she sped.

And then, in the darkness of this vast shipping room, she paused to listen.

Not a sound. She may as well have been alone in the catacombs of Egypt or the Mammoth Cave.

"Must be this way," she breathed.

Truth was, she had lost her sense of direction. She was not sure which way to go. She took a dozen steps forward. Finding herself confronted by a dark bulk, she started walking round it. Having paused to think, she found fear gripping at her heart. When she tried to retrace her steps she discovered that the stairs had apparently vanished. She was lost.

"Lost!" she whispered. "Lost in the subbasement of this great building at night!" Even

as she thought this there came to her, faint and far distant, yet very distinct, the even tread of footsteps.

"It's not Laurie. He doesn't walk like that. It — it's — " her heart stood still, "it's a watchman! And here I am dressed in this magnificent garment which does not belong to me. Somehow I must get back to the third floor and to Rennie! But how? How!"

CHAPTER II

CRIMSON WITH A STRAND OF PURPLE

Panic, an unbelievable terror ten times stronger than her will, seized Lucile and bore her fleetly down a dark, unknown aisle. The very thought of being discovered by a watchman unknown to her, mingled with the sensation of the fear of darkness, had driven her well-nigh frantic.

"The cape," she whispered to herself. "I must not be found with the cape!"

Had she but possessed the power to reason quietly, she might have known that the watchman, searching for an explanation of her strange conduct, would, upon her suggesting it, take her back to the third floor and Rennie. Not being in full possession of these powers, she abandoned herself to panic. Snatching the cape from her

shoulders she thrust it under her arm and plunged on into the darkness.

In the deeper shadows she saw dim forms looming up before her. Some seemed giants ready to reach out and grasp her; some wild creatures poised to fall upon her from the dark.

Now she tripped and went sprawling. As she sprang to her feet she caught the gleam of a light. Thinking it the watchman's flashlight, she was away like the wind.

At last pausing for breath, she listened. At first she heard only the beating of her own heart. Then, faint and far away, came the mellow chimes of the great clock announcing the arrival of half past ten.

"Half past ten!" she whispered in consternation. "Rennie will leave. The place will be in darkness and I shall be lost! What shall I do?"

Again she caught a faint gleam of light. Watching it for a moment, and seeing that it was steady and constant, she dared to creep toward it.

Drawing nearer, she saw that it came drifting

down an elevator shaft from some place a long way above.

"The elevator is there. The door is open!" she said to herself in surprise. "And there is no one in it."

Just then, as she strained her ears to listen, she caught again that heavy, even tread of the watchman.

Our nerves are strange masters. A great general is thrown into panic at sight of a cat; a woman of national fame goes into convulsions at sight of rippling water on the sea. As for Lucile, at that moment nothing could have so overthrown her whole mental balance as that steady tramp-tramp of the watchman.

This time it drove her to the most curious action. As a wild animal, driven, winded, cornered, will sometimes dash into the very trap that has been set for him, so this girl, leaping forward, entered the elevator cage.

Had there been more time, it may have been that her scattered wits returning would have told her that here, where the dim light set out her

whole form in profile, was the most dangerous spot of all.

Before she had time to think of this the elevator gave a sudden lurch and started upward.

Nothing could have been more startling. Lucile had never seen an elevator ascend without an operator at the levers and she naturally believed it could not be done; yet here she was in the cage, going up.

It was as if some phantom hand were in control. Darkness and silence rendered it more spectral. The ever increasing speed shot terror to her very heart. Sudden as had been the start, so sudden was the stop.

Thrown to the floor and all but knocked unconscious, she slowly struggled to her feet. What did it mean? What was to be the end of this terrible adventure?

As she looked before her she saw that the car had stopped about three feet above some floor. The doors to that floor were shut. The catches, however, were within her reach. Should she attempt to open them and make a leap for it?

Had she but known it, those doors were supposed to open only when the cage was level with the floor. But the infinite power that tempers the wind to the shown lamb sometimes tampers with man-made doors. As if by magic, the doors swung back at her touch and with a leap she was out and away.

Then, gripping her madly beating heart, she paused to consider. She was free from the elevator, but where was she? Her situation seemed more desperate than before. She had not counted the floors that sped by her. She did not know whether she was on the sixth or the tenth floor.

Reason was beginning to come into its own. With a steadier stride she took a turn about the place. Putting out a hand, she touched first this object, then that.

"Furniture," she said at last. "Now on what floor is furniture sold?"

She did not know.

Coming at last to a great overstuffed davenport, she sat down upon it. Feeling its drowsy

comfort after her hot race, she was half tempted to stretch herself out upon it, to spread the splendid cape over her, and thus to spend the night.

"It won't do," she decided resolutely. "Every extra moment I spend here makes it worse."

At that she rose and looked about her. Over to the right was a broad stretch of pale light.

"It's the moonlight falling through the great skylight of the rotunda," she breathed.

Instantly she began making her way in that direction. Arrived at the railing, she looked down. She was high up. The very thought of the dizzy depth below made her feel faint; yet, fighting against this faintness, she persisted in looking down until she had established the fact that she was on the sixth floor. There remained then but to descend three flights of stairs to find the blessed third floor and, perhaps, Rennie.

She was not long in descending. Then, such a silent cry of joy as escaped her lips as she saw Rennie's light still dimly burning in the far corner.

Slipping on the cape, the better to hide the dust

and dirt she had collected from many falls, she at last tiptoed up close to the desk where Rennie was working.

"Hello, dearie," said Rennie, smiling up at her through her thick glasses. "Ready to go? In just one moment."

Lucile caught her breath in astonishment. Then the truth burst upon her. The whole wild adventure through which she had been driven at lightning speed had consumed but half an hour. So intent upon her work had dear old Rennie been that she had not noted the passing of time.

Some three minutes later, arm in arm, they were making their way down the dark and gloomy marble stairs; and a moment later, having safely passed the guard, they were out on the deserted street.

The instant they passed through the door they were caught in a great whirl of wind and snow that carried them half the way to State Street before they could check their mad gait. For Rennie, who was to take the surface line, this was well enough; but for Lucile it meant an

additional half block of beating her way back to her station on the "L."

With a screamed "Good-night" that was caught up and carried away by the storm, she tore herself away and, bending low, leaped full into the teeth of the gale.

A royal battle ensued. The wind, seeming to redouble its fury at sight of a fresh victim, roared at her, tore at her, then turning and twisting, appeared to shake her as some low born parent shakes his child. Snow cut her face. The blue cape, wrapping about her more than once, tripped her for a near fall.

"But it's warm! Oh, so warm!" she breathed. Then, even in the midst of all this, she asked herself the meaning of all this strange mystery of the night, and, of a sudden, the sight of Laurie stepping into that tortuous chute flashed back upon the screen of her memory.

Stopping stock still to grasp a post of the elevated's steel frame, she steadied herself and tried to think. Should she turn back? Should she make one more attempt to rescue Laurie from

whatever plight he may have gotten himself into?

For a moment, swaying like a dead leaf on a tree, she clung there.

"No! No!" she said at last, "I wouldn't go back there to-night! Not for worlds!" She made one desperate leap across the street and was the next moment beating her way up the steel stairway to the elevated.

Once aboard the well heated train, with the fur lined cape adding its cozy warmth to her chilled and weary body, she relaxed for the first time to think in a quiet way of the night's affair.

A careful review of events convinced her that she had behaved in quite a wild and insane manner at times, but that on the whole the outcome was quite satisfactory. Certainly she could not have been expected to return home without a wrap on a night such as this. Surely she had had nothing whatever to do with Laurie's giving away his pass-out, nor of his flinging himself so recklessly down the parcel chute. He was almost a stranger to her. Why, then, should she concern herself with the outcome of an affair which

he had clearly entered into of his own free will?

On this last point she could not feel quite comfortable, but since the elevated train was hurling her homeward and since she could not, had she used her utmost will-power, have driven herself back into that great darkened store, and since there was no likelihood of her being admitted without a pass, she concluded that she must still be moving in the path of destiny.

In strange contrast to the wild whirling storm outside, she found her room a cozy nook of comfort. After throwing off her street clothes and going through a series of wild gymnastics that came very near to flying, she drew on her dream robe, threw a dressing gown across her shoulders then sank into a great overstuffed chair. There, curled up like a squirrel in a nest of leaves, she gave herself over to cozy comfort and to thoughts.

She had arrived at a very comforting one — which was that since she had worked until ten this night she need not report for duty until twelve the next day — when a spot of color

caught her eye. A tiny flash of crimson shone out from a background of midnight blue. The midnight blue was the rare cape which she had hung against the wall.

"Wonder what that touch of scarlet means?" she whispered drowsily. Immediately she thought of Hawthorne's "Scarlet Letter." She shuddered at the thought. She had dreamed bad dreams for weeks after reading that book.

Gathering up her robe, she sprang lightly from the chair to put out a hand and take up the folds of the cape.

"A thread," she mused, "a crimson thread!"

That the thread had not been accidentally caught up by the garment she saw at once. With a needle it had been passed twice through the cloth, then tied in a loose knot. It was at the place on the cape that rested over one's heart.

"Now why would one wear such a curious ornament?" she asked herself while a puzzled look came on her face.

"The Scarlet Letter, a crimson thread across one's heart. How similar! How very strange!"

she mused. Again she shuddered. Was this some ominous omen?

With deft fingers she untied the knot, and drawing the thread free, carried it to her great chair where, intent upon examining the thread in detail, she again curled herself into a position of perfect comfort.

"Huh!" she exclaimed after a time. "Strange sort of thread! Looks like ordinary silk thread at first. About size 40 I'd say, but if you examine it closely you discover a strand of purple running through it, a very fine strand, but unmistakable, running from end to end. How very, very unusual."

"Anyway," she said slowly after another moment's thought, "the whole affair is dark, hidden, mysterious. And," she exclaimed, suddenly leaping from her chair and clasping her hands in ecstasy, "how I do adore a mystery. I'll solve it, too! See if I don't! And I must! I must! This cape is not mine. I cannot keep it. It is my duty to see that it is returned to the owner, whoever she is and whatever her motive for en-

tering our store at that unearthly hour and for leaving her wrap instead of mine."

Drawing a needle from the cushion on her chifforobe, she threaded it with the crimson bit with its purple strand, then, after selecting the spot from which it had been taken, she drew it through the wonderful cloth twice and knotted it as it had been before.

"There," she breathed, "that's done. Now for bed."

Two thoughts passed across her dreamy mind before she fell asleep: "I may sleep until ten. How perfectly gorgeous! The first person I shall look for when I enter the store will be Laurie Seymour. I wonder if I shall see him? How exciting. I wonder——"

In the midst of this last wonder she fell asleep.

CHAPTER III

A NEW MYSTERY

It was a very satisfactory reflection that Lucile's mirror returned to her next morning at ten. After fifteen minutes of such gymnastics as even a girl can perform in her own room with the shades down, followed by five minutes of a cold shower, she stood there pink and glowing as a child. The glow of health and joy remained on her cheeks even after her drab working dress had been drawn on. It was heightened by the half hiding of them in that matchless white fox collar. Almost instantly, however, a look of perplexity overspread her face as her eyes caught the reflection of a tiny spot of crimson against the darker color of the gorgeous cape which had so mysteriously come into her possession.

"The crimson thread," she whispered. "I do wonder what it could mean."

The elevated train whirled her swiftly to her place of toil.

To her vast relief, the first familiar figure to catch her eyes as she passed between the tables of books in her own corner at the store was that of Laurie Seymour.

Could it be that as he smiled and nodded to her she caught in his eye a look of witching mockery? One thing she did see plainly enough — there were slight bruises and two freshly plastered cuts on his right hand.

"Got them when he went down the chute," she told herself.

As she paused before him she threw back the broad front of the mysterious cape and said:

"You should know something about this, I am sure."

"Beg pardon?" He started and Lucile thought she saw a sudden flush on his cheek.

"You should know something about this," she repeated.

"Why, no, begging your pardon again," he answered easily. "Having had no sisters and

having never ventured into matrimony, I know almost nothing about women's garments. I should say, though, that it was a fine cape, a corking fine one. You should be proud of it, really you should."

This was all said in such a serious tone, and yet with such a concealed touch of mockery in it, that Lucile abruptly turned away. Plainly there was nothing to be learned from him concerning the mystery, at least not at the present moment.

As she turned, her eyes chanced to fall upon a stack of books that stood by the end of the table.

"Well, well!" she exclaimed. "There were two hundred books in that stack last night! Now they are at least a third gone!"

"Yes," Laurie smiled, and in his smile there was a look of personal interest. "Yes, they are going very well indeed. We shall need to be ordering more soon. You see, it's the critics. They say it is a good book, an especially good book for young folks. I can't say as to that. It

sells, I can assure you of that, and is going to sell more and more."

As Lucile made her way to the cloak room, she was reminded of a rumor that had passed through the department on the previous day. The rumor had it that Jefrey Farnsworth, the author of this remarkable book "Blue Flames," (of which she and Laurie had just been speaking, and which was proving to be a best seller in its line and threatening to outsell the latest popular novel) had disappeared shortly after the publication of his book.

The rumor went on further to dilate upon the subject to the extent that this promising young man (for he was a young man — no rumor about that) had received a letter the very day he had vanished. There was no mystery about the letter. Having been found on his table, it had proven to be but a letter from his publishers saying that his book would undoubtedly be a great success and that, should he be willing to arrange a lecture to be given before women's clubs regarding his work and his books, they

had no doubt but that he would greatly profit by it and that in the end his sales would be doubled. Women's clubs all over the land would welcome him with open hands and sizable checks. The letter had said all this and some few other things. And upon that day, perhaps the most eventful day of his life, Farnsworth had vanished as completely as he might had he grown wings and flown to the moon.

"Only a rumor," Lucile said to herself, "but if it's true, it's mystery number two."

Instantly there flashed through her mind the puzzling look of unusual interest that she had noticed on Laurie's face as he spoke of the huge sales of the book.

With this recollection came a strong suggestion which she instantly put from her mind.

After hanging the mysterious cape in a secluded corner, she hunted out her sales-book and plunged into her work. Even a sales-book of soiled red leather may be entrusted with a mystery. This she was to learn soon enough.

Such an afternoon as it proved to be! She

had need enough for that robust strength of hers. Saturday afternoon it was — two weeks before Christmas. As the clock struck the noon hour the great office buildings poured forth people like a molten stream. Bosses, bookkeepers, stenographers, sales-managers, office boys, every type of man, woman and overgrown child flooded the great stores. Mingling with these were the thousands upon thousands of school children, teachers, and parents, all free for an afternoon of pleasure.

A doubtful sort of pleasure, this. Jostling elbow to elbow, trampling and being trampled upon, snatching here, snatching there, taking up goods and tossing them down in the wrong place, they fought their way about. The toy department, candy department, children's book department — these were the spots where the great waves of humanity broke most fiercely. Crowded between a fat woman with a muff and a slim man with a grouch, Lucile wrote a sale for a tired looking little lady with two small children. In the meantime an important appearing woman

in tight fitting kid gloves was insisting that Lucile had promised to "wait upon" her next. As a matter of fact Lucile had not seen her until that very moment, and had actually promised to sell a large book to a small person who was in a hurry to catch a train,

"Catch a train!" Lucile exclaimed to the checking girl. "There must be a train leaving every two minutes. They're all catching trains."

So, crowded, pushed and jostled about, answering a hundred reasonable questions and two hundred unreasonable ones every hour; smiling when a smile would come, wondering in a vague sort of way what it was all about, catching the chance remark of a customer about "Christmas spirit," Lucile fought her way through the long day.

Then at last, a half hour before closing time, there came the lull. Blessed lull! Almost as abruptly as it had come, the flood ebbed away. Here and there a little group of people moved slowly away; and here someone argued over a long forgotten book or hurried in to snatch up

a book and demand instant attention. But in the main the flood-tide had spent itself.

Creeping back into a dark corner and seating herself upon the floor, Lucile added up her sales and then returned to assist in straightening up the tables which had taken on the appearance of a chip yard.

"People have a wonderful respect for books," she murmured to Laurie.

"Yes, a lot of respect for the one they buy," smiled Laurie. "They'll wreck a half dozen of them to find a spotless copy for their own purchasing."

"Yes, they do that, but just think what a shock to dear Rollo or Algernon if he should receive a book with a slightly torn jacket-cover for a Christmas present!"

"That *would* be a shock to his nervous system," laughed Laurie.

For a time they worked on in silence. Lucile put all the Century classics in order and filled the gaps left by the frenzied purchasers. Laurie, working by her side, held up a book.

"There," he said, "is a title for you."

She read the title: "The Hope for Happiness."

"Why should one hope for it when they may really have it?" Laurie exclaimed.

"May one have happiness?" Lucile asked.

"Surely one may! Why if one —"

Lucile turned to find a customer at her elbow.

"Will you sell me this?"

The customer, a lady, thrust a copy of Penioc-chio into her hand.

"Cash?"

"Yes. I'll take it with me, please."

There was a sweet mellowness in the voice.

Without glancing up, Lucile set her nimble fingers to writing the sale. As she wrote, almost automatically, she chanced to glance at the customer's hands.

One's hands may be as distinctive and tell as much of character as one's face. It was so with these hands. Lucile had never seen such fingers. Long, slim, tapering, yet hard and muscular, they were such fingers as might belong to a musician

or a pickpocket. Lucile felt she would always remember those hands as easily as she might recall the face of some other person. As if to make doubly sure that she might not forget, on the forefinger of the right hand was a ring of cunning and marvelous design; a dragon wrought in gold, with eyes of diamonds and a tongue of ten tiny rubies. No American craftmanship, this, but Oriental, Indian or Japanese.

Without lifting her eyes, Lucile received the money, carried her book to the wrapper and delivered the package to the purchaser. Then she returned to her task of putting things to rights.

Scarcely a moment had elapsed when, on glancing toward her cash book which lay open on a pile of books, she started in surprise.

There could be no mistaking it. From it there came a flash of crimson. Imagine her surprise when she found that the top page of her book had been twice pierced by a needle and that a crimson thread had been drawn through and knotted there in exactly the same manner as had that other bit of thread on the blue cape.

It required but a glance to assure her that through this thread there ran the single strand of purple. The next instant she was dashing down the aisle, hoping against hope that she might catch a glimpse of the mystery woman with the extraordinary fingers and the strange ring.

In this she failed. The woman had vanished.

"And to think," she exclaimed in exasperation, " to think that I did not look at her face! Such a foolish way as we do get into — paying no attention to our customers! If I had but looked at her face I would have known. Then I would have demanded the truth. I would have — " she paused to reflect, " well, perhaps I shouldn't have said so much to her, but I would have known her better. And now she is gone! "

But there was yet work to be done. Drawing herself together with an effort, she hurried back to her table where the disorderly pile of books lay waiting to be rearranged.

" Speaking of happiness," said Laurie, for all the world as if their conversation had not been

interrupted, "I don't see much use of writing a book on the hope for happiness when one may be happy right here and now. Oh, I know there are those who sing:

'This world's a wilderness of woe.
This world is not my home.'

"But that's religion, of a sort; mighty poor sort, too, I'd say. Idea being that this world's all wrong and that if you enjoy any of it, if the scent of spring blossoms, the songs of birds, the laugh of children at play, the lazy drift of fleecy clouds against the azure sky, if these things make you happy, then you're all wrong. I guess they'd say: 'Life here is to be endured. Happiness only comes after death.' Huh! I don't think much of that."

"How can one secure happiness?" Lucile asked the question almost wistfully. She was over-tired and not a little perplexed.

"There's a lot of things that go with making people happy," said Laurie as his nimble fingers flew from book to book. "I'm quite sure that happiness does not come from long hours

in a ball-room nor from smoking cigarettes, nor any one of the many things that put dark rings about the eyes of our young new rich or near rich, and that set their eyelids twitching.

"Happiness," he mused, throwing back his head and laughing softly. "Why, it's as easy to be happy as it is to tell the truth. Have friends and be true to them. Find a place you love to be and be there. Keep your body and mind fit. Sleep eight hours; eat slowly; take two hours for quiet thinking every day. Have a crowd you love, a crowd you feel that you belong to and fit in with. Of course they'll not be perfect. None of us are. But loveable they are, all the same.

"For instance, take the crowd here," he said, lowering his voice. "You and I are transients here. Christmas eve comes and out we go. But look at Donnie and Rennie, Bob, Bettie, and dear old Morrison over there in the corner. They're the regular ones, been here for years, all of them.

"See here," he continued earnestly, "I'll bet that when you came in here you had the popu-

lar magazine notion of the people who work in department stores; slang of the worst kind, paint an inch thick, lip stick, sordid jealousy, envy, no love, no fellowship. But look! What would happen if Rennie, the dear mother and straw-boss of us all, should slip before a car and be seriously injured to-night? What would happen? Not a soul of us all, even us transients, but would dig down and give our last penny to buy the things that would help her bear it. That's what I mean, a gang that you belong to, that you suffer with, endure things with and enjoy life with! That's the big secret of happiness."

As Lucile listened to this short lecture on happiness, she worked. At last her task was done. Then with a hurried: "Thanks awfully. Good-night," she rushed for the cloak-room preparatory to donning the fur-lined cape. She half expected to find it gone, but it was not, and after throwing it across her shoulders she dashed down the stairs to join the homeward rushing throng.

As she snuggled down beneath the covers that

night, she found her mind dwelling with unusually intense interest upon the events of the past two days. Like pictures on a screen, strange, unanswerable questions passed through her mind. Who was the mystery woman of the night shadows in the book department? Why had Laurie given her his pass-out? Why had she left her gorgeously beautiful cape behind for a shop girl to wear home? How had the unusual crimson thread come to be drawn into the cloth of the cape? Had the mystery woman put it there? Had she drawn that thread through the page of Lucile's cash book? It seemed that she must have. But why? Why? Why? This last word kept ringing in her ears. Why had Laurie given up his pass-out? Where had he slept that night? How did it happen that an elevator in a department store at night ran of its own accord with no one to work the lever? Surely here were problems enough to keep one small brain busy.

Then again, there was the problem of the missing author of that wonderfully successful

book. What did Laurie know about that? Why had he talked so strangely about it?

When she had allowed all these problems to pass in review before her mind's eye, she came to but one conclusion — that she would believe Laurie a sincere and trustworthy person until he had been proven otherwise. Her faith had been shaken a bit by the revelation of the night before.

"Life," she whispered sleepily to herself, "is certainly strange. Surely one who can talk so wonderfully about happiness can't be bad. And yet it's all very mysterious."

Right there she concluded that mysteries of the right sort added much to the happiness of us all, and with that she fell asleep.

CHAPTER IV

THE PICTURE GIRL

Little dreaming of the stirring events that awaited her, and without the slightest anticipation of the new mystery and unusual responsibilities that were crowding in upon her that day, Lucile took her Monday morning train with the quiet composure of one who, having enjoyed a perfect Sunday of rest, looks forward with enthusiasm to a day of interesting service.

The supreme moment of that day arrived in a rather unusual place at a time when the clock's hands were nearing the hour of 1:00. Before that, however, there came hours of the usual toil which many would call drudgery. From eight-thirty until ten there were few customers. Every moment was taken up. Two truckloads of books had come down from the apparently inexhaustable storerooms above. These must be placed on

the tables. Tables must be dusted; cash-books filled with blanks for the day; books out of place must be returned to the proper section.

As Lucile came and went in the performance of her allotted tasks, she was more and more impressed with what Laurie had said about this group of loyal friends, this company of salespeople who were so much like a very large family.

"They are all my friends, almost my kinsfolk," she told herself with a little gulp of joy that was very near to tears.

And so they were. Even outside her little corner they greeted her with a comradely smile. There was the pleasing lady who sold new fiction, and the tumbled haired lady who sold travel books and had sold books in stores from coast to coast. In the first alcove was the worried lady who handled standard sets; in the second was the dignified one who murmured in low, church-like tones of prayer books and rosaries; while in the farthest, deepest alcove of all was dear old Morrison, the young-old man

with premature gray hair and a stoop. But his lustrous eyes were lighted with an earnestness such as one seldom looks into, and he had an air of poise and refinement and a smile of perfect fellowship. He sold fine bindings, and knew them well. Besides that, he could tell you the name and publishers of every book for serious minded people published since the days of Ben Franklin.

Working among such people as these, and in spite of all her strenuous hours of labor, Lucile dreaded the coming of Christmas Eve when she must bid them all farewell and return to her studies. Never before had she been so tempted to relinquish her cherished hope of university training and to settle down to work among a host of interesting and loyal friends.

So the forenoon wore away, and with the passing of each hour the great and startling event of that day came sixty minutes nearer.

The noon hour at last arrived. Having hastily eaten her paper-bag lunch, Lucile hurried from the store. There was yet three-quarters of an

hour to spend. She would spend the time sauntering through a place of great enchantment, the Art Museum.

Five minutes of battling with wind and intense cold, and she was there. Racing up the stone steps, she paused an instant for breath. Then she entered and hurried up the broad marble stairway. At last she came to a place where a great circular leather cushioned seat in the center of a room offered opportunity for perfect repose. There she sank down, to hide her eyes with her hands until the frost and the glare of snow had left them, then to open them slowly and to squint away contentedly toward the wall which lay before her.

Before her, and a little to the left, was a painting from Ireland, the work of a great master. It was a simple thing in a way, a boy clad in humble garb shoveling snow, and a girl with a shawl thrown over her shoulders, coming down the well cleaned path. Very simple people these, but happy and kind. There were sparrows perched along the path. A very humble theme,

but such masses of wonderful color! Had she not seen it, Lucile would not have believed that artists could have achieved such perfection.

To the left was an equally lovely picture; dawn on the heather, the sun rising from the dripping dewy green and a girl reaper going to her toil with the song of a lark on her lips and joy in her eye.

These were the pictures that brought rest and joy to Lucile's half hour of leisure and helped prepare her for events that cast no shadow before them.

She had descended the marble stairs and was about to leave the building when a picture arrested her attention; a living picture of a girl. And such a girl as she was! A supple grace to her waist and shoulders, a proper curve at the ankles, and a face — such a face! Cheeks aglow with the color the frosty out-of-doors had given them. Cheeks offset by dark, deep-set eyes, made darker still by eyelashes that were like hemlocks in a snow covered valley, and a smooth oval forehead backed by a wealth of short, wavy

hair. This was the picture; only faintly sketched, for behind all this beauty there was a certain strength of character, a force of will that seemed a slumbering fire gleaming from her eyes. In the background were people and marble pillars. The girl had just entered the Museum and, uncertain of her way, stood irresolute.

"She's from the country," Lucile whispered to herself. "Her clothes show that. But how startling, how unusual, how — how striking she is!

"She's like the pictures I've been seeing, they were unusual and priceless. She is the same. And yet," a feeling of fear and sadness swept over her, "those priceless pictures are carefully guarded night and day. I wonder if she is? She seems alone. It's not to be wondered at, their guarding those pictures. Who would not like one for his room? Who would not love to open his eyes each morning upon the girl in the 'Song of the Lark'? But they'd wish to possess that girl, too. A father, a mother, sister, brother, would be proud to possess her, to look

at her every morning, a — anyone would. And yet, she's not — "

Her meditations were cut short by sight of a figure standing not ten feet from her; a tall, slim, young man whose features might have been carved from marble, and in whose eyes Lucile had surprised a steely glance such as she had once caught in the beady eye of a down-swooping hawk.

And then, as if enacting her part in a play, the girl of this living picture suddenly wavered where she stood. Her face went white, then with a little, wavering cry, she crumpled in a heap on the marble floor.

Lucile could have sworn the girl was alone and uncertain of her next move. She understood what had happened. Having traveled far in the intense cold, the girl had been overcome by the heavy warmth of the museum and had fainted. The thing that happened next puzzled Lucile beyond belief.

After ten seconds of motionless panic, a half score of people sprang to her assistance. But

the young man, he of the marble features and steely eye, was first up.

"It's all right," he was saying in a quiet, even tone, "she's my sister. I'll take care of her. We have a car outside."

Lifting the unconscious girl in his arms, he started for the door.

"It's not all right! It's not all right!" Lucile fairly shrieked the words.

To her vast astonishment, the next moment she was gripping a burly guard by the arm and saying in a voice hoarse with emotion:

"It's not all right! He's not her brother. He — he's stealing her! Stop them!"

To her further astonishment, the guard believed her. With three strides he reached the door and blocked it.

"Here! Here!" he said in the tone of one who is accustomed to be obeyed. "It won't do. You can't take her out like that."

"Oh, all right," there was a note of forced indifference in the young man's voice, but there was murder in his cold, hard eyes. "All right,

if you know so much. Fetch some water and get her out of it. She'll tell you I'm her brother. But be quick about it. You're a beef-head for ordering a gentleman about."

Lucile's heart went to the bottom of her shoes. What was this? Had her emotions led her astray? Was he indeed the girl's brother? It would seem so, else why would he consent so readily to the delay, which must mean proof one way or another? She was soon to see. Tremblingly, she awaited the outcome. Dropping upon the marble floor, she pillowed the girl's head in her lap and brushing away the hair from the face, caressed the cold forehead with a soft hand.

When the water had been brought Lucile dampened her handkerchief and laid it icy cold on the other's forehead. Almost instantly the eyes opened and the girl, having dragged herself to a sitting position, stared about the museum.

"Wha — where am I?" she asked. "What has happened?"

"You're in the Art Museum. You fainted."

"Faint — fainted!" There was terror in her eyes.

"It was the cold. It's nothing, really nothing." Lucile put a steadying arm about her. "You'll be quite all right in a moment."

"Now where is that brother of hers?" grumbled the guard. "He's nowhere to be seen! He's gone!"

"Gone?" echoed Lucile.

"Brother?" said the girl in astonishment. "I have no brother. I am alone."

Such a wave of feeling swept over Lucile as made her sick and faint. She had been right, dreadfully right. She had saved this girl, this wonderful creature, from — she dared not think from what.

For a moment, rocked by her emotions, she sat there in silence. At last, with a supreme effort, she dragged herself to her feet.

"You look the worst of the two," said the guard, giving her a keen glance.

"I'm all right," she protested stoutly.

To the girl, whom she had assisted to her

feet, she said, "You may come with me if you wish. Our store's only two blocks away. There's a rest room. You'll be all right there until you sort of get your bearings. Perhaps I can help you."

"I'd — I'd be glad to," said the other, clinging to her impulsively.

So they left the museum together. Though she kept a sharp watch to right and left, Lucile caught no sign of the volunteer brother, but she shivered once or twice at the very thought of him.

* * * * * * * *

It was a very much perplexed Lucile who curled up in her big chair that night for a few moments of quiet thought before retiring.

A new mystery had been added to her already well filled list of strange doings. "First," she said to herself, telling them off like beads on a rosary, "there comes the beautiful mystery woman and the cape she left behind; then Laurie Seymour and the vanishing author; then the crimson thread; and now this girl."

As she whispered this last she nodded toward the bed. There, lying wrapped in slumber, was the beautiful girl she had saved in the museum.

"She's even more beautiful in sleep than when awake," Lucile murmured. "And such a strange creature! She hasn't told me a thing."

The last statement was entirely true. Any notion Lucile had of the girl, any guess at her hidden secrets, was based on observation and conjecture alone. Not one word regarding them had escaped the strange girl's lips.

Having accompanied Lucile to the store, she had lain upon a couch in the "quiet room" for three hours. Whenever Lucile had stolen a moment from work to look in upon her, the girl had appeared to be day-dreaming. Far from being worried about events of the past or the immediate future, she had appeared to be enjoying the recalling of an interesting adventure or anticipating one.

At five she had risen from the cot and, having brushed her hair and arranged her clothing, had insisted upon helping her new-found friend to

put her tables to rights. She had accepted Lucile's invitation to pass the night with her with the nonchalance of one who is offered this courtesy from a long-time friend.

Innocent of one scrap of baggage, in the same manner she had accepted Lucile's offer of a dream robe.

In only one respect had she showed her independence. Having produced a dollar bill from somewhere on her person, she had insisted on paying for her own frugal lunch.

"Her clothes are the strangest of all," Lucile whispered to herself. "When a girl comes upon a run of hard luck, she's likely to try to keep up an appearance even though she is shabby underneath. But look at her; a countrified suit of shiny blue serge, two years behind the times, and her undergarments are new and of the finest silk, up to the minute, too. How is one to explain that?"

She was not disturbed in the least about the girl's morals. She was as sweet and clean as a fresh blooming rose. Lucile would have sworn

to that. With the lights turned out, and with the tingling winter air entering the open window, before retiring the girl had joined Lucile in the nightly " setting up " exercises and had appeared to enjoy them, too.

The strange girl's skin was like the finest satin. Her lines were perfect, her muscles superb. Through lack of knowledge of the exercises, she often blundered. But she could whirl more quickly, leap higher and swing about more gracefully than Lucile, who had never failed to throw her whole heart into her gym work.

" All that," Lucile murmured as she drew off her bathrobe preparatory to slipping beneath the covers, " all that, and she has not told me one word about herself. For a country girl she certainly has her full supply of reserve. To-morrow I am to try to get work for her as a wrapper. No doubt I can do it. And then? "

She thought about the future for a moment. She was alone this year. If you have read our book, " The Cruise of the O'Moo," you will remember that while living in the yacht in dry

dock she had two companions — Florence and Marion. Florence had gone home. Marion was in Alaska. Now Lucile was alone. She would welcome a friend and, unless she had misread her character, this girl had the qualities of a steadfast and loyal pal.

"But her past?" Lucile whispered as she placed her slippers beneath the bed and drew back the covers. "Ah well, we shall see."

Once during the night she was wakened by the girl, who was evidently talking in her sleep.

"Don't let them. Don't! Don't!" she all but screamed as she threw out her arms for protection from some dream foe.

Putting her arms about her, Lucile held her tight until the dream had passed and she fell back once more into peaceful slumber.

CHAPTER V

"COME AND FIND ME"

"I'll pull some wires." The kindly face of Morrison, the man of fine bindings, gleamed as he said these words to Lucile next morning. "That's the way things are done these days. I haven't much notion how they were done in the past. But now, if I want anything, I pull some wires. For instance, your young friend whom you found in the Art Museum and whose name is Cordelia but whom you choose to call Cordie for short, wants work in this store. You ask me to pull wires and I pull 'em. I pull one and Miss So and So comes bowing out of her box of an office and I whisper what I want. 'I'll pull some wires,' says she, putting on her best smile. 'I'll put in a wedge, a very thin wedge.'

"She puts in her thin wedge. She pulls some wires and Mr. So and So up on the eleventh

floor bobs bowing out of his box and inclines his ear to listen.

"'Ah! Yes, I see, I see,' he murmurs. 'I shall pull some wires.'

"He pulls some wires. A slip of paper appears. It is signed. It is given to your friend. She goes here, she bobs there, and presently here she is. She has accepted 'the iron ring,' wrapping packages with very gay company all about her, having a good time and getting pay for it. But let me assure you it could not be done without wires pulled and thin wedges inserted. No, it could not be done. Nothing these days is done without wires and wedges. Wires and wedges, wedges and wires, my dear."

With this very lucid explanation of the way the world is run these days, the benevolent Morrison bowed himself away.

True to his prediction, two hours later the mysteriously silent Cordelia was installed in an obscure corner of the book section, working at the wrapping counter. She had accepted "the iron ring," said ring being an affair of solid

iron into which, in a semi-circular bump on its edge, had been set a sharp bit of steel. The theory is that the steel edge cuts the stout cord with which the bundles are tied. Truth was that more often the sharp edge cut the girls' fingers than did the steel the string. So, in time having learned wisdom, Cordie discarded this doubtful bit of jewelry and used a knife. However, she worked on steadily and quite skillfully. Before night it had become evident to all that the girl was proving a credit to her young protector, and that, take it all in all, wires had not been pulled nor wedges inserted in vain.

Two matters of interest came to Lucile's attention that day. A rumor was confirmed and a discovery made that in the end was to take someone somewhere.

First in regard to the discovery. Someone had left a morning paper on Lucile's table of books. She snatched it up and was about to consign it to the waste box when a headline caught her eye:

"COME AND FIND ME"

Beneath this was a second headline:

"Two Hundred Dollars for a Handshake."

There was not time to read what followed. Hastily tearing the corner from the page, she thrust this scrap into her pocket to be read later.

"The rumor's confirmed," said Laurie a moment later as he thrust a clipping from a publisher's weekly in her hand.

There were but a few lines. Lucile read them in a moment. It had to do with the disappearance of the promising young writer, Jefrey Farnsworth, author of "Blue Flames."

"There can be no doubt," the article went on to say, "that the young man has utterly disappeared. Being a single man with few intimates, and a man who lived a rather secluded life, he has either slipped away without being noticed or has met with some grave mishap. His publishers are greatly disturbed over his disappearance. Without doubting his willingness to assist in the task of being made famous, they had booked him for talks before no less than twenty women's clubs.

"As the popularity of his book, 'Blue Flames,' had grown by leaps and bounds, every woman in the country was ready to be told by him just what her son or daughter should or should not read. There was not the least doubt but that here was the first genuine best seller in the line since the first days of Treasure Island and Huckleberry Finn. Yes, the world was ready to hear him speak. But Farnsworth was not ready — at least he has vanished."

"Twenty women's clubs," exclaimed Laurie, doing a feint in pantomime. "Think of speaking to twenty women's clubs! Thousands and thousands of kid-gloved, well fed, contented women! Oh! Wow! Twenty clubs, then twenty more and twenty after that! To drink tea with 'em and to have them grip your hand and tell you how they enjoyed the rot you fed to them! Oh! Ow! Ow!"

"Women's clubs are all right," protested Lucile, her face lighting with anger. "Their work is constructive. They do a great deal of good."

"Beg a thousand pardons," said Laurie, coloring in his turn. "I didn't mean to say they weren't. They're all right, and the ladies too, Lord bless 'em. But how does that go to prove that a poor, innocent young writer, who happens to have struck gold with his pen but who never made a speech in his life, should be chained to a platform and made to do tricks like a trained bear before thousands of women? Women's clubs are all right, but they couldn't club me to death with their clubs." He threw back his shoulders to join Lucile in a laugh over his rather bad pun, and there, for the time being the matter ended.

Lucile was destined to recall the whole affair from time to time. Hours later, she had an opportunity to study his face unobserved. She noted his high forehead, his even and rugged features, his expressive hands, and when she saw him selling away on that stock of "Blue Flames" as if his life depended upon it, she was led to wonder a great wonder. However, she kept this wonder to herself.

The noon hour had come before Lucile found time to again look at the scrap of printing she had torn from the discarded newspaper. In the employees' lunch room, over a glass of milk and a sandwich, and with the wonderful Cordie sitting opposite, she read the thing through.

"Come and find me. I am the Spirit of Christmas," it ran. "I offer gold, two hundred in gold, for a shake of the hand, yet no one is so kind as to give me the clasp of cheer. I am the Spirit of Christmas. I am tall and slim, and of course I am a woman — a young woman whom some have been so kind as to call fair. To-day I dress in the garb of a working woman. Yesterday it was the coat of a sales-girl. At another time it was in more gorgeous apparel. But always my face and my hands are the same. Ah yes, my hands! There is as much to be learned from the hands as from the face. Character and many secrets are written there.

"Yesterday I walked the Boulevard, as I promised I should, yet not one of the rushing thousands paused to shake my hand and say:

'You are the Spirit of Christmas.' Had one done so, tho' he had been but a beggar in rags, the two hundred of gold would have clinked into his pocket. Yet not one paused. They all passed on.

"I entered a little shop to purchase a tiny bit of candy. The saleslady, a little black-eyed creature, scowled at me and refused to sell so little, even though I looked to be a shop-girl. She did not shake my hand, and I was glad, for had she done so and had she said: 'You are the Spirit of Christmas,' the gold would have clinked for her. I left my mark, which is my sign, and passed on.

"Later I entered a busy shop, a great shop where tired girls rushed here and there constantly. I troubled a dear little girl who had a wan smile and tender eyes, to show me many things. I bought nothing in the end, but she was kind and courteous for all that. I wished — Oh, how I wished that she would grasp my hand and whisper ever so softly: 'You are the Spirit of Christmas.' But she said never a word, so

the gold did not clink for her. After leaving my mark, which is also my sign, I passed on.

"To-day I shall join the throngs that shop among the windows of State Street. I shall enter a store here and another there. I shall pause here to examine goods and there to make a purchase. At every place, as I pass on, I shall leave my mark, which is also my sign. If you chance to see me, if you know me, if you read my secret in my face or in my hands, grasp those hands and whisper: 'You are the Spirit of Christmas.' Then gold will clink for you, two hundred in gold.

"I am the Spirit of Christmas. Everywhere I go I leave a crimson trail behind."

This was the end. Lucile glanced up with a dazed and puzzled look in her eyes.

"What in the world can it mean?" she asked, holding the bit of paper before Cordie.

Cordie laughed. "That's something the paper is doing. I think it's just to make people buy the paper. No one has ever recognized her. She's clever."

"I'd like to find her," mused Lucile.

"Wouldn't you, though? Who wouldn't? You'd get the gold if you did; but you never will. She's keen. Why, only two days ago she was in this store for a half hour. Bought a book, mind you, and you may have sold it to her. Think of that! The day before that she was in the store for six hours. Think of that! And no one knew her. They'll never get her, trust her for that. But if they do, the gold will clink." The girl laughed a merry laugh, then hurried away for a cream-puff.

Left to herself, Lucile had time for a few moments of quiet thinking. She found her pulse strangely quickened by the news story and her companion's interpretation. Somehow, almost as if some strange power outside her were whispering it to her, she felt forced to believe that she could connect this new and interesting discovery with some of the other mysteries which had come to haunt her.

"But how?" she asked herself. "How?"

Cordie appeared to know a great deal about

this "Spirit of Christmas" lady and the gold that would clink for a handshake. But after all, she had revealed no facts that were not known to hundreds of thousands who had followed the matter closely. It had all been in the papers.

"No, it doesn't tell me anything about Cordie," Lucile whispered, "except —" she paused suddenly. Cordie had told of things that had happened in the city four days back. Could she have been in the city all this time? Probably had been. And without baggage, or so much as a dream-robe. How very strange!

But had she been without baggage? Might she not owe a board bill? Might not her belongings be in the hands of some landlady at the present time?

"It's a wonder she doesn't tell me about herself," Lucile murmured. "It's no use to ask her. A person who is forced to reveal her past is almost sure to tell anything but the truth. I must wait her time. It's true she has a little money; but perhaps not enough to pay the bill.

"I wonder," she went on thoughtfully, "why

I don't cut her adrift? Why should I be looking after her? Haven't I enough to do in looking after myself?"

It was true that she had her own responsibilities, but she knew right well that if need be she would do a great deal more for the girl before casting her off to become an easy prey to the human hawks and vultures who haunt a great city.

"But this lady of the Christmas Spirit," she murmured. "The good fates surely know I need that gold. And if this strange little beauty, Cordie, costs me something, which she promises to do, I shall need it more than ever."

Once more her eyes ran over the scrap of paper. They came to a sudden pause.

"Behind me I leave a crimson trail," she read.

For a moment her brow was wrinkled in puzzled thought. Then she gave a sudden start.

"If it should be! If it meant just that!" she exclaimed half aloud.

"But then, of course it couldn't. A crimson trail — a crimson trail ——"

"Here's one for you," exclaimed Cordie, setting a deilcious cream-puff before her. "There's just time for devouring them before we go back to work. Work! Oh, boy! I say it's work! But it's heaps of fun, anyway.

"Say!" she exclaimed suddenly, "Do you know James?"

"Who is James?"

"The man who carries away the packages from my desk."

"A stooped old man."

"Not a bit of it."

"They always are."

"He's not. Take a look at him. He's a sight for tired eyes. He — he's intrigueing. I — I'm working on him. He's awful reserved, but I think he likes me. He's got a story. I'll get it. Leave that to me."

"So even little Cordie loves mysteries and has found one to study out," thought Lucile with an amused smile as she turned to go.

CHAPTER VI

THE IRON RING

Cordie's description of James proved quite true. An intrigueing figure was this James; a stalwart man of forty, a straight, square-shouldered six-footer, with face as brown as a coffee bean. He was unmistakably American, yet he seemed oddly out of place as, with arms piled high with bundles, he moved steadily through the crowd. There was a certain directness, and with all that a slight roll about his walk, that suggested some sort of sea craft. He was not unlike some port-to-port steamer, waiting at dock for its load, then steaming away to the port of discharge.

"A silent man, and one who has been accustomed to command, not to plod," was Lucile's mental comment. "He's not accustomed to being called James, like a chauffeur or a butler.

You can see that by the twinkle in the corner of his eye when someone calls him by that name. I wonder what could have brought him to the extremity of carrying bundles for twenty dollars a week. I'm sure he doesn't drink to excess. His face would show it if he did. Oh well, that's Cordie's little mystery. Let her fathom it when the opportunity comes."

Cordie's opportunity came a little later, and in a decidedly startling manner.

In the meantime this was another busy afternoon; one of the busiest of the season.

"Only listen to them!" Lucile said to Cordie as she waited for a parcel. "Most of them are women trying to select books for boys and girls. Not one in ten really knows what she wants or what boys and girls read these days. Listen —"

Cordie listened as she worked, and this, from a score of pairs of lips, is what she heard: "Have you got the Alger books?" "Do you keep Peck's Bad Boy? That's such a splendid story. Don't you think so?" "I want a — a book for a boy fourteen years old. What can you recommend?"

"Have you the Elsie books? Those are *such* sweet stories!" "I want a book for a boy twelve years old. I don't want anything trashy, though. Which of these fifty-cent books would you recommend?" "Is this a good book?"

"The answer," whispered Lucile with a little giggle, "the answer, if they say 'Is this a good book?' is always 'Yes.' Always yes, whether you think so or not. I'll tell you why. Nine times out of ten, when a woman customer says 'Is this a good book?' she has already made up her mind that it is a good book. If you say 'Yes' she'll smile and buy it. If you say 'No,' she'll frown and buy it anyway. So why provoke a frown, and Christmas only two weeks away?"

Only her untiring good nature and her native sense of humor, kept Lucile on her feet and going. There were times, however, when even these deserted her. One of those unfortunate moments arrived this very afternoon. A particularly unpleasant customer had said to her: "I want a book about a boy who was brought up by the monks." After suggesting everything

that seemed akin to this, she happened upon "Tarzan." "Oh yes!" exclaimed the customer, "That's it. Tarzan."

A second customer wanted "Laddie." When the modern "Laddie" was produced, the customer insisted that this was not the original "Laddie," but a cheap substitute; that the first "Laddie" was written years ago by a person who's name she did not recall, but who had written another book called something else. She had insisted on Lucile's asking everyone in the section about it and, after leaving very warm and unhappy, reappeared ten minutes later with another clerk, still looking for the original "Laddie."

In the midst of all this Lucile came upon a fidgeting customer whose fingers were constantly plaiting stray locks of hair and whose lips were saying: "I must make a train. I really must. Do you think you could get them to hurry. Do you? Do you really? That would be *so* nice of you!"

After hurrying the sale through and getting

many a sharp look for stepping in ahead of her turn, Lucile had the pleasure of seeing the customer meet a friend an aisle over and pause for a prolonged spell of gossip.

"Who could believe that they could be such children?" she murmured. "No, we haven't the Broncho Buster Boys," she turned to answer a query. "That's a fifty-cent series which we do not carry." The person who asked the question was a rather pompous lady in kid gloves.

"Have you the Broncho Buster Boys?"

She caught the words spoken behind her back. The customer, ignoring her decided negative, had deliberately turned about and asked the same question of a girl who had come on the floor that morning and knew nothing about the stock.

"I told her," Lucile said in as steady a tone as she could command, "that we do not carry them."

Instantly the customer flew into a towering rage. Her words, though quite proper on the lips of a society lady, were the sort that cut to the very soul.

A sharp retort came to Lucile's lips and she said it.

She was in the midst of it when a hand touched her shoulder and a steady voice said:

"Here! Here! What's this?"

The words, while not said in an unkindly tone, had a ring of authority to them. Wheeling about, Lucile found herself facing a beautiful lady, one of the most beautiful she had ever seen; black hair, full cheeks of wonderful color, and eyes of the deepest blue. Lucile took in all the beauty of her for the first time at a glance, and at the same moment cold terror struck to her heart. This was Miss Bruce, the head of the section, the one who could dismiss a salesgirl at a word. And she had just heard Lucile break the most rigid rule of the house! She had talked back to a customer!

White faced, staring, endeavoring to speak but uttering no sound, Lucile stood there as if frozen to the spot.

"There, there, dearie! I know how it is. Don't do it again, that's all." Lucile felt a

friendly pressure on her arm, then the great lady of the section was gone.

In spite of her bravest efforts, tears rushed to Lucile's eyes. One splashed down on either cheek before she could check them. Were they tears of vexation or gratitude, or merely tired tears? Who could say?

Through the tears Lucile dimly saw a face. It was an electrifying vision, and dashing away the tears, she became at once her own, keen, better self.

"Yes, yes, it is! It's the Mystery Lady," she assured herself. "She's — she's talking to Cordie. I must ——"

As she started toward the wrapping stand where stood the Mystery Lady, a voice at her elbow said:

"Will you sell me this? Could you have them hurry a little? I must make a train. I really must." It was the harried and hurried lady of a half hour previous. She had found another book and was making another train.

With great reluctance and much pent-up

anger, Lucile waited upon her; and in the meantime, as was her wont, the Mystery Lady, the lady of the crimson thread, had vanished.

"Who — who was the tall lady you were speaking to a moment ago?" she breathlessly asked Cordie a moment later.

"How should I know? She asked me for a string to tie a package. Lots of them ask for string, or a piece of corrugated paper, or a card to write a greeting on."

"Was that all?"

"That was about all."

"Look!" exclaimed Lucile. "Who put that there?"

She was pointing to a loose end of wrapping paper through which had been drawn and neatly tied a bit of crimson thread with a single purple strand.

"Search me," smiled Cordie. "How should I know?"

While Lucile was disengaging the thread and thrusting it in her pocket, Cordie was searching the top of her desk.

"That's funny," she said at last. "It was here a moment ago. Now it's gone."

"What?"

"My iron ring."

"The one you cut cord with?"

"I'm supposed to use it for that," Cordie tossed her head. "The thing cuts my finger. All the same, I ought to have it. You're supposed to turn such things in when they lay you off. But if it's gone, it's gone." Shrugging her shoulders, she promptly forgot it. So did Lucile, but the time came when she was reminded of the loss in a most forceful manner.

"I wonder," she whispered as she moved away, "I do wonder what she does that for. This is the third time. It's the strangest thing I ever heard of." She fingered the crimson thread.

The melting away of great stocks of the year's most popular book for young people, "Blue Flames," was most amazing. A fresh truck load, three or four hundred copies, had come down that very morning. By mid-afternoon they were two-thirds gone.

For a time, as she watched, Lucile's astonishment grew; then it began to ebb. She was learning the secret of it. Laurie Seymour hovered over the pile constantly. Hardly a customer left him without purchasing one or more copies. Apparently well informed regarding the contents of the book, he told still more regarding the personality of the author and how he had gone about the task of gathering the material. All of the local color of the book was penned with minute exactness; the characters were true to life; their actions, while not pedantic, were such as would lead girls and boys to higher thinking and unselfish living. More than that, the story contained precisely the elements which young people of to-day demand. Action, adventure, suspense, mystery — all were here in proper and generous proportions. Thus he would describe the book.

"Yes," he would assure the prospective purchaser, "it's this year's publication; not six weeks off the press and it sells for a dollar. How is that possible? That it might have a large

sale the author cut his royalty to one-third, and the publishers cut their profits accordingly. The book compares favorably with many a book selling for nearly twice the price."

What customer could refuse such a book? Few did. Even more important than this was the fact that the other salespeople, especially those who were new and had little knowledge of the stock but who were zealous for quick sales, listened to his lucid story of the book, and having learned it by heart, joined in selling it. There were times when clerks fluttered as thickly about that pile of books as sparrows around a crust of bread.

"Who is Laurie Seymour; why is he so greatly interested in that particular book, and how does he come to know so much about it?" Having put these questions to herself, Lucile went about the task of asking others about him. She asked Rennie and Donnie, the inseparable two who had worked in that corner so long. She searched out Tommie, the young man of twenty who knew all about boys' books. She

asked Morrison, of the fine bindings section, and even Emmy, the veteran inspector. All shook their heads. They had come down one morning, and there he was selling books. That had been two weeks previous. Someone had pulled some wires and here he was. By-and-by the rush would be over, then out he would go. That was the way things were done at Christmas time. It wasn't worth while to care too much!

But Lucile did care. Her curiosity had been aroused. She wanted to know more about Laurie Seymour.

Her curiosity was given a trace of satisfaction that very evening. At least she found out who knew about Laurie. Yes, she found out, but then ——

She had come hurrying round a pillar when she all but ran into Laurie. He had been talking in low tones and laughing in notes quite as low. To her great surprise she saw that the person he was talking to was none other than the perfectly beautiful Miss Bruce, the head of the section.

"And to think," Lucile said to herself, "he actually appeared to be joking her about something! And he a sales-person! Ah well, our chief is a star — would have been a star on any stage, and a star has a right to be friendly with any member of the cast."

"Well," she smiled to herself, "I know now who could tell me all about Laurie Seymour; but I'd never dare ask. Never! I'll have to find out some other way."

One impression coming from this incident bore down heavily upon her. Laurie Seymour was a young man with a past broader than the four walls of the juvenile book section. Just what that past might have been, she could not guess.

"Perhaps," she told herself, "he is some artist getting pictures from life; or an actor gathering local color for a play, or — "

"Is your table in order?" It was Rennie who broke in upon her meditations.

It wasn't, so she hurried away to forget, for the time being, Laurie Seymour and her perplexing problems.

CHAPTER VII

CORDIE'S MAD FLIGHT

"Cordie, there's something I should tell you."

Cordie looked up from the book she was reading, stared at Lucile for a moment, then with a toss of her pretty head exclaimed: "If you should, why don't you?"

They were at the end of another day. Some time had passed since the Mystery Lady had last appeared in the store. Work had increased; crowds of buyers had grown denser, more insistant in their demands. Two perpendicular lines had appeared between Lucile's eyes. Cordie, too, had felt the strain of it. Her nerves were tense. She had been upon Lucile's bed for a half hour, trying to relax. It was no use.

"Why don't you tell me?" she demanded impatiently.

"I'm afraid it may frighten you."

"Frighten me?" the girl's eyes went wide with surprise.

"Yes, but I think I should tell you. It may put you on your guard."

Cordie sat bolt upright.

"Do you remember the time I found you — when you fainted in the Art Museum?" Lucile asked in a quiet voice.

"I couldn't forget that. Wasn't it terrible?"

"More terrible than you think, or at least I believe it might have been."

"Why?" Cordie stared.

"A few seconds after you fainted, a strange young man picked you up in his arms. He said you were his sister. He started to carry you out and would have, too, if I hadn't made the guard stop him."

"Oh!" breathed Cordie, wild eyed, incredulous. "So that was what the guard meant when he asked where my brother was? Oh, how — how sort of romantic!"

"It may have been," said Lucile in a very sober tone. "He may have been romantic, but

he also may have been very bad. That's why I thought you ought to know. He may be keeping a watch on you. Men who are fascinated by a face often do. You ought not to go alone upon the streets. You should not have been alone that day. No girl from the country, unacquainted with the ways of the city, is safe alone upon its streets and within its public buildings."

"Why, I'm not—" Cordie halted in the midst of the sentence and began again. "Did you think—" then drawing her lips tight as if to keep in a secret that was about to escape, she lapsed into silence.

When she broke the silence a moment later the look on her face was very serious. "I do realize the danger," she said slowly. "Truly I do. I will be careful, very, very careful. It was wonderful of you to save me from that—that man. How can I ever thank you enough?"

Hopping down from the bed, she wound her arm about Lucile and planted a kiss upon her forehead.

Just at that instant a question entered Lucile's mind. "I wonder when her appreciation will reach down as deep as her pocketbook? That's a sordid thought. I ought not to think it," she told herself, "but I just can't help it."

Lucile was having to pay an increased rent on her room because of the girl's occupying it with her. A pay day had come and gone, yet her young charge had shown no desire to bear her share of this burden.

"No! No! I mustn't let myself wonder that," Lucile corrected herself stoutly. "She'll pay when she can. She's probably saving up for her rent which is in arrears somewhere else. I do wonder, though, what she was about to tell me when she said: 'I'm not—' and 'Did you think—' I truly wish she'd tell me about herself, but I can wait her time for revealing."

Half of the following day had not passed before Lucile repented having told Cordie of her volunteer brother. "He'll probably never be seen again by any of us," she told herself, "and now look at the poor girl. She's all un-

nerved; grips her desk and stares in a frightened manner every time a man looks at her. And yet," she reflected, "if anything happened and I hadn't told her I'd never forgiven myself. Surely life is full of perplexing problems."

Ere that day was done something was destined to happen which would make this particular problem many times more perplexing. Since she knew nothing of this, Lucile went serenely on selling books.

"Let me tell you something," said Rennie, the veteran book-seller, who had apparently made an excuse for going to lunch with Lucile that day. "You're letting this work get on your nerves. Look at those puckers between your eyes. It's no use. You mustn't let it. You'll go to pieces and it's not worth it. You've got your life to live. You—"

"But Rennie——"

Rennie held up a finger for silence. "You're young; haven't learned the gospel of repose. You, perhaps, think of repose as the curling of one's self up in a soft-cushioned chair. That's

not repose; it's stagnation. Did you ever see a tiny bird balancing himself on a twig over a rushing waterfall and singing his little heart away? That's repose. You can have poise and repose in the midst of the crowding throng. The bird, only half conscious of the rushing water beneath him, sings the more sweetly because of it. We, too, may have our service sweetened by the very rush of things if we will.

"And it is service! You believe that, don't you?"

There was a new light in the veteran saleslady's eyes. Lucile, as she looked at her frail body, thought to herself: "She's more spirit than body. She's given half herself away in service."

"Why yes," she replied slowly, "I suppose selling juvenile books is a service in a way."

"You suppose!" Rennie gripped her arm until it hurt. "Don't you know it is? It may be made a great, a wonderful service. There are books and books. You have read many of

them. You know them. You are young. You have read. Some you have loved, some despised. Which do you sell? Which?"

"Why, the ones I love, of course."

"That's just it. Being endowed by nature with taste, good taste, and having had that taste improved by education, you are able to choose the best.

"Books are like water. Some are like foam, the white caps of the sea; pure enough but effervescent. They pass in a moment and are lost forever. Others are like scum from a stagnant pool; they are poison. Then there are those blessed others which are like the cool, pure, refreshing water that comes bubbling up from a mountain spring. Reading has an untold and lasting influence on a child. Do you believe that? When you have put one of those better books into the hand of a boy or girl, you have conferred a lasting blessing upon someone. Do you believe that?"

"Ye — yes."

"Of course you do. Now, when you go back

to your work this afternoon, do it with the consciousness that you are really being a benefactor to your generation. Say to yourself: 'See all those people. Some of these are to go away from here this afternoon richer because I have been here to serve them, to advise them, to select for them the thing they really need.' Then watch the little annoyances, the petty troubles that tempt you to fret, 'Fold their tents like the Arabs and silently steal away.'

"Sales-people?" Rennie continued. "Why, we are far more than that. We may, if we will, take our place beside teachers, nurses, librarians, and all those whose names will be written high on the tablet of the future where will appear all those who have truly benefited their race.

"Pardon me," she smiled again, "I didn't mean to preach, but really I hope it may do you good."

"I — I'm sure it will." There was a mist in the girl's eyes as she said this. She had caught a vision of what real life work meant to this frail woman. Once more she was

tempted to give up her education in favor of a career as a vender of juvenile books.

At ten minutes before closing time Lucile, having promised to meet Cordie at the northeast door, hurried down the stairs to the first floor. Then things began to happen with lightning-like rapidity.

She had just started on her little journey across the store to the northeast entrance when, all in a flash, she caught sight of a hand, such a hand as she had seen but once and would never forget. The long, slim, muscular fingers and the ring of the dragon's head were there. She could not be mistaken. Somewhere in that jostling throng was the Mystery Lady. And — yes, Lucile was sure of it, there she was off there to the right. She could not mistake that face. With a bound she was after her.

"Not so fast there! Not so fast!" exclaimed a floor man. "There isn't any fire. What made you think there was?"

Wedged in between a tall lady from the city and a very broad-shouldered, bear-skin coated

man from the country, Lucile could but heed the floorman's admonition.

"She's making for the door," she whispered breathlessly. "I'll follow her out. Can't fail to catch her in the street. I'll get her before she has gone a block. And then — "

Ah yes, and then — well, she'd decide what was to be done when the time came. She'd trust to inspiration.

She did not catch up with her in the first block, nor the second or third, either. The sidewalks were rivers of people; the cross streets filled with automobiles. Considering the fact that this was an obstacle race of an exceedingly unusual type, the Mystery Lady made wonderful progress. As for Lucile, she was not to be outdone; indeed, she gained a little here, and a little there. She dodged through an open space on the sidewalk and sprinted down a stretch of street where no autos were parked or traveling.

"I — I'll get her in the next block," she panted. "Suppose there'll be a scene, but who cares? Here goes!"

A policeman's whistle, releasing the flood of autos on the cross street, had just blown. With a leap she sprang away before them. Grazed by the wheel of a gray sedan, drawing an angry hoot from a huge touring car, she crossed the channel and was about to dash on when a hand seized her firmly by the arm and gave her such a turn as fairly set her whirling.

"Here you!" exclaimed a gruff voice. "What you tryin' to do? Tryin' to commit suicide? Autos has their right as well as them that walks. Give 'em their turn, can't you?"

What was there to do? She could not tell this policeman of her cause for speed. She could but stand there panting until he chose to release her. And as she stood there, with time to think, a startling question came to her mind:

"Cordie! What of Cordie? I promised to meet her at the northeast entrance! Closing time has now passed."

For a moment her head whirled, but as the grip on her arm relaxed she murmured:

"Well, whatever is to happen has happened

back there. I'll get madamoiselle of mysteries yet!"

At that she crept slowly away until she was lost from sight of the officer; then again raced on at breakneck speed.

* * * * * * * *

She was right. Something indeed had happened by the door of the northeast entrance. Cordie had been prompt in keeping her appointment; especially so since her nerves, disturbed by Lucile's revelation of the night before, were on edge.

Surprised at not finding Lucile waiting for her, she had moved back into a secluded alcove to watch the passing throng crowd through the doors.

Crowds always amused her. Some of the people were short and some tall; some young, some old; but all were interesting. Each had his story to tell if only he could be induced to tell it. This is why the flow of a river of people is so interesting.

Just when it was that her attention was

drawn from the moving throng to a single stationary individual, the girl could not tell. The instant she saw the man she felt he had been watching her; felt too that she had recognized in him her volunteer brother of the Art Museum.

"Yes," she whispered as cold dread gripped her heart, "there is the hawk-like eye, the marble face. It is he. Oh! How shall I escape?"

Losing her power to reason, she dashed away from the door and into the crowd that was now thronging toward the exits.

* * * * * * * *

Lucile found it rather difficult to again locate the Mystery Lady. When at last she succeeded it was to get a good square look at her, the first she had been afforded.

"How strangely she is dressed!" she murmured. "Like some countrywoman come to the city for shopping."

For a second she was inclined to doubt her judgment. It could not be the lady — yet, yes, there was her profile. There could be no mistake; so, again she dashed along after her.

Although she maintained a pace that appeared to be a leisurely one, the Mystery Lady was hard enough to overtake. Turning to the right, she crossed two streets to at last come out upon the Boulevard. Swinging to the left, she joined the home-going throng.

Lucile, gaining moment by moment, was all but upon her when she turned quickly to enter a broad, open door.

"Now I have you!" Lucile murmured.

She passed through the broad door just in time to see the mysterious one push back a heavy curtain and disappear.

Lucile was about to follow, when a guard, touching her on the shoulder, demanded:

"Got a pass?"

"Why — why no," Lucile stood there nonplussed.

"This is Opera Hall. You can't go back of that curtain without a pass."

"But — but that lady gave you no pass."

The guard made no reply. He merely shrugged and smiled.

Dropping back a step or two, Lucile stood staring at the curtain. Her head was whirling. What a strangely privileged woman this one must be. She entered and left a great department store at two hours before midnight, and no one said to her "No." She steps into a vestibule of a great musical hall and passes behind the curtain without a pass. What would she do next?

Suspended from one brass post to another, a heavy silk rope hung before the curtain. There were gaps in the curtain. Through one of these gaps, as Lucile stood staring at it, a hand was thrust. It was the hand of the mysterious lady. And upon it, beside the dragon's head ring, was another. And this ring one more unusual and startling than the other. It was the iron ring of a bundle wrapper!

"Cordie's ring," Lucile whispered, "and, as I live, a diamond has been set in it. A magnificent diamond, worth hundreds of dollars! How strange! How wierd! A diamond set in iron!"

Even as she thought this, the hand disappeared.

Instantly the heavy purple curtain began to sway. Expecting anything, the girl stood there breathless. A needle flashed twice through the cloth of the curtain, then in its place there appeared a tiny spot of crimson.

"The crimson thread!" Lucile whispered. "And I may not pass beyond the curtain!"

CHAPTER VIII

THE DIAMOND-SET IRON RING

When Cordie fled from the man of the hawk-like eye and the marble features she dashed directly into the moving throng of shoppers. In this, however, she found scant relief. No matter which way she might turn she felt sure that the man pursued her and would overtake her if she did not flee faster and faster.

Putting her utmost strength into this flight, she dashed past counters strewn with goods, round a bank of elevators, through narrow aisles jammed with shoppers, across a narrow court and again into the throng. At last, in utter desperation, she fled down a stairway; then another and another. Little dreaming that she had been descending into the vary depths of the earth, she came up at last with a little suppressed scream to a place where from out a long

row of small iron doors fire gleamed red as a noonday sun.

Where was she? Surely she had not dreamed there could be such a place as this in a great department store.

After wavering unsteadily for a moment, she turned, stumbled, righted herself, and would have gone racing back up the stair had not a heavy hand fallen upon her shoulder and a gruff, kindly voice said:

"Beg pardon, Miss Cordelia, are you in trouble?"

Surprised at hearing herself called by her own name, she turned about to find herself staring into the face of James, the bundle man.

For a few seconds she wavered between pause and flight. There was, however, such a light of kindness in the man's eyes as could not be questioned. So, stepping back from the stairs, she said:

"Yes, I am in trouble. The — the man; I think he was following me."

"He'd do well not to follow you too far this

way, if he meant you any harm." The bundle man shook his powerful frame, then glanced at the fires.

"Wha — what are they?" Cordie stammered. "Where are we?"

"Don't you know?" he looked incredulous. "Them's the boilers that heat the buildin'. I suppose you never wondered before how this huge building got heated? Well, that's how. Them's the boilers that does it.

"Sometimes I come down here to sit after hours," he half apologized. "The boys down here that tends to the stokers let me come. I like it. It's the nearest thing to the sea that one finds about the buildin'. You see, it's sort of like a ship's hold where the stokers work."

"Oh, you belong to the sea."

"Yes, Miss. I'll tell you about it; but that will do for another time. You'll be going home. If it's all right, I'll see you safely on your way, or if you want I'll see you safely home. You need have no fear of me. I'm old enough to be your father, an' I took a sort of interest in

you from the first. I'd be glad to help you — "

He broke short off to stare at the door through which Cordie had entered. Framed by the outer darkness, a face had appeared there. However well shaven and massaged it might be, it was not a pleasing face to look upon and hawk-like eyes were set in a countenance as expressionless as marble.

"That's him!" whispered James, staring as if his eyes would pop out of his head. "That's the very man."

The next instant the man disappeared. There was reason enough for this too, for with every muscle of his face drawn in lines of hate, the stalwart James had leaped square at the door.

And what of Lucile?

After gazing for a moment in astonishment at the purple curtain with the touch of crimson shining out from it, (beyond which the Mystery Lady had disappeared,) she stepped close enough to make sure that same purple strand ran through the thread. Then she turned and walked out of the building.

She found herself more mystified than ever. When would all this maze of mysteries be solved? Why had the Mystery Lady done that? Why the crimson thread? Why the iron ring? That was the fourth time the crimson thread had appeared, and this time there could be no doubt but that it had been she who had held the needle.

Strangely enough, at this moment there flashed through her mind one sentence in that clipping relating to the lady who called herself the Spirit of Christmas.

"I am the Spirit of Christmas," she whispered it as she recalled it. "I am the Spirit of Christmas. Wherever I go I leave my mark which is also my sign." She wondered vaguely what she could have meant by that.

This lady of the Christmas Spirit had the whole city on tip-toes. Everyone was looking for her; everyone hoping to come downtown some fine morning to meet her and to claim her bag of gold. Shoppers gazed into faces of fellow shoppers to wonder: "Are you the Spirit

of Christmas? Shall I grasp your hand?" News boys, staring up at lady customers who slipped them pennies for papers, wondered: "Are you the Christmas Lady?"

Every day the paper told how she had been dressed on the previous day, where she had been and what she had done. One day, in the guise of a farmer's wife, she had visited the stockyards and had spent hours wandering through great buildings or on board-walks above the cattle. The next day found her again among the throngs of shoppers. Here she had purchased a handkerchief and there a newspaper. She described the clerk and the newsboy. The clerk and the boy read it and groaned. For them the great moment had come and was gone forever.

"Who will discover her? When will it be? Who will get the gold?" These were the questions that were on every tongue.

There could be no doubt but the paper was reaping a golden harvest from it, for did not everyone in the city buy a paper that they might read of her latest exploits and to dis-

cover where she was to be on that day, and to dream that this day he might be the lucky one; this day he might hear the gold coin jingle?

Lucile thought all this through as she hurried back toward the store. At the same time she chided herself for being so foolish as to miss her appointment with Cordie for such a wild goose chase. She hoped against hope that she would find Cordie still waiting.

She found the door closed. As she pressed her face against the glass she saw but one person near the entrance — the night watchman. Cordie was not there.

"Gone," Lucile murmured. "I only hope nothing has happened to her."

At that she turned about and raced away to catch an on-coming elevated train.

* * * * * * * *

As James disappeared through the door of the furnace room of the department store, Cordie sank down in a chair. The chair was black and greasy, but she had no thought for that. Indeed, so excited and frightened was she that for a

time she was unable to think clearly about anything.

When at last the full meaning of the situation had forced its way into her consciousness, she leaped to her feet, exclaiming:

"Stop him! Stop him! He'll be killed!"

"I bet you he won't," a burly furnace tender smiled quietly. "He's a hard boiled egg, that boy; muscles like steel and quick as a cat. If anybody does him in you'll have to give him credit. Y'ought t' see him box. There ain't a man among us that can touch him."

Somewhat reassured by this glowing description of her companion, the girl settled back again in her seat. She knew that she was safe enough here with these rough but kindly men.

As she sat there thinking, there came to her mind a question. Why did James go into such a fit of anger at sight of the stranger at the door?

"Surely," she told herself, "it could not have been because the man had been following me. That wouldn't be natural. James scarcely knows

me. Why should he suddenly become such a violent champion of my cause? And besides, he had no way of knowing that that was the man who was following me. He did not wait to ask a single question; just whispered: 'That's him!' and rushed right at him."

"No he didn't do it because of me," she concluded after a few moments of thought. "He's seen that man before. I wonder when and where. I wonder what he's done to James?"

Then came another, more startling question. What would James do to the man if he caught him?

Instantly her keen imagination was at work. Quickening her sense of hearing, it set her listening to sounds which she told herself were the dull thud of fist-blows, the sickening rush of a blade as it sped through the air, a low groan of pain, and then sharper, more distinct, the pop-pop of an automatic.

In vain she told herself that with the hiss of steam, the dull thud-thud of revolving grates and the general noises of the boiler-room, it was

quite impossible for her to distinguish sounds ten yards away, and that in all probability the two men were hundreds of feet away from her, on some other floor. The illusion still persisted. So certain did she become that a battle was being fought just outside the door that she found herself griping the arms of her chair to keep from crying out.

The nickel-plated clock against the wall had ticked away a full half hour. The suspense had grown unbearable when of a sudden, with face grimy, hair tousled, and clothing all awry, James appeared at the door.

"You — you," Cordie started up.

"Yes, miss," James grinned. "I know I look as if I'd come in from a long and stormy voyage. My deck needs swabbin' down and my sails a furlin', but I'll be shipshape and ready to take another cruise before the clock can strike eight bells."

This talk sounded so quaint to the girl that she quite forgot the recent danger James had been in, and sat staring at him as he thrust his

head into a huge basin of water and proceeded to scrub it with a course brush, much as one might some huge vegetable.

By the aid of a comb and whisk broom, he succeeded in making himself presentable.

"Now," he smiled a broad smile, "your Uncle James, once a seaman and now a land fighter, is ready to pilot you home. What's the port?"

"Sixty-first and Drexel," said Cordie.

"All right. Port 'er bow. We're off."

Concerning his recent combat — if there had been a combat — James said not a word. Cordie wondered at this, but eager as she was to know the outcome of the battle, if there had been one, she dreaded quite as much to hear the whole truth. Visions of an inanimate form, lying bruised and bleeding in some dark corner of the stair, set her shuddering. So in the end she asked no question.

Their passage to the upper floor and out of the building was uneventful. The watchman at the door recognized them and allowed them to pass.

Previous to this time James had seemed quiet and uncommunicative, but now as they rattled along on the L train he told her many a wild tale of the sea journeys he had made. In his deep mellow drawl he talked of the whale ship *Addler* in northern seas; of Eskimo and polar bear and the gleaming northern lights; and then he talked of the Cutter *Corwin* among the palm shadowed South Sea Islands.

It was with a real feeling of regret that Cordie, hearing her own station announced, realized that their visit was at an end.

Five minutes later, brimming over with excitement, she burst into Lucile's room.

"Wait!" exclaimed Lucile as she read in Cordie's eyes the story of some thrilling experience. "You've had an adventure. So have I. Let's not spoil 'em in the telling. Let's set the stage for a story. You haven't had a bite to eat, have you?"

"No — o," Cordie admitted, "not a single bite. I'd forgotten."

"Neither have I. You'll find a loaf of bread

and a slice of cream pimento cheese in the upper dresser drawer. There are some vanilla wafers, too. You make the sandwiches and I'll have the cocoa piping hot in a minute. No, I'll tell you, let's dress for it first."

Fifteen minutes later they sat in their bright colored dressing gowns, sipping the delicious hot beverage and hungrily devouring sandwiches.

"Now," said Lucile after the last sandwich had vanished and fresh cups had been poured, "now's the time for spinning yarns. You tell yours first."

With many a gesture and dramatic pause, Cordie told of her startling discovery, her wild dash through the throng, her descent into the depths of the earth, and of the strange doings down there beneath the surface of the city's streets.

"Yes," said Lucile, sipping her chocolate thoughtfully as Cordie's narrative ended, "that surely was the young man who attempted to carry you away when you fainted in the Art Museum. Dear little girl, you must be careful,

very careful indeed. You must never be left alone; never! Never! Even if the Mystery Woman beckons or the Lady of the Christmas Spirit clinks her gold in my very ears, I will not desert you again."

It was a very warm and friendly hand that Lucile felt tucked into her own, and a suspiciously husky voice that said:

"Thank you, my dear big sister."

"But," Cordie exclaimed suddenly, "I must not tell them. It would never do. They wouldn't let me ——"

Suddenly checking her speech as if about to unwittingly reveal a secret, she changed the subject abruptly. "Please tell me of your adventure," she said.

"My adventure?" smiled Lucile. "Compared with yours, it was no adventure at all — merely an episode. However, since it throws some light on a mystery and reveals the whereabouts of a bit of stolen property, I must tell you about it."

Then, while Cordie leaned back among the

cushions, her eyes half closed as if she were day dreaming, Lucile told of her experience with the Mystery Lady.

"My iron ring!" exclaimed Cordie, sitting bolt upright as Lucile came to that part of the story. "My iron ring! The old mischief! I might have known! I——"

Again Cordie checked herself.

"Might have known what?" asked Lucile.

"Might have known that someone had stolen it, I suppose," finished Cordie lamely. "Anyway, someone did, didn't they? And isn't it funny that she should have a diamond set in it? Wouldn't it be a joke to come upon her wearing it? Wouldn't it, though? I'd march right up and say, 'Lay-d-e-e give me the ring! You stole it. My precious, my onliest, only iron ring!'" She threw back her head and laughed.

Lucile joined her in the laugh, and with this forgot for a time that Cordie had said something very unusual about the ring and the lady who had taken it. At last Cordie broke the silence:

"James is a very unusual person."

"Yes, he must be."

"Do you suppose he caught that man — the one who had been following me?"

"I hope so, but perhaps not. You say he was all mussed up when he came back?"

"Uh-huh."

"But not bruised, nor bloody, nor anything like that?"

"No, I guess not — no, not a bit."

"Then probably he didn't. When I got through my wild race about the place the other night I was good and mussed up, and I hadn't been in a fight either. It wouldn't be easy to catch anyone in that labyrinth."

Again there was silence for a little while.

"Lucile," whispered Cordie, bending forward eagerly, her face alight with some strange idea. "James is so mysterious. Do you suppose he could be a pirate in hiding?"

"A pirate! Why child, there aren't any pirates."

"Not any at all?"

"You don't read about any, do you?"

"You don't read about lots of things. You never read about my wrapping bundles, did you? But I am, just the same. Everything doesn't get in the papers. I think it would be wonderful if he turned out to be a real pirate. You'd think he was one if you heard some of the stories he told me to-night about the sea."

"All right," laughed her companion, "if you can make him out a pirate, a nice friendly sort of pirate who is kind to ladies and all that, you're welcome. But for my part, I'd give a lot more to know what that self appointed brother of yours has done to James. It must have been something rather terrible."

"Yes," agreed Cordie, "it surely must."

"Listen!" exclaimed Lucile. "There go the chimes! Ten o'clock, and you work in the morning!"

Leaping from her chair, she began cleaning up the remnants of their little feast. Ten minutes later the room was darkened for the night.

Though the room was dark, and though Lucile

was tired enough for sleep, her eyes did not close at once. She was thinking and her thoughts were not of the most cheerful sort.

The outlook, she was forced to admit, was gloomy enough. She had hoped to save enough money from her pay at the store to start her in the new term at school. This hope was fast dwindling away. Her own expenses had been greater than she had thought they would be. Added to this was the increase in her room rent due to the presence of Cordie. Her dream that Cordie was saving money had been blighted only the night before, for on that night Cordie had brought home the gorgeous dressing gown she had worn as they sat over the cocoa cups.

"And it must have cost her every penny she possessed," groaned Lucile. "How extravagant! How — how ——"

She wanted to say ungrateful, but could not quite do it. The girl appeared so impractical, so lovable, so irresponsible, that she could not find the heart to blame her.

Quickly she switched her thoughts to a more

cheering subject — Laurie Seymour. He had proven such a jolly fellow-worker — so cheerful, so kind and helpful, so ever ready to bear the heavy burdens — that Lucile had all but forgotten the fact that he had given his pass-out to the Mystery Lady on that night when she had in such a surprising manner come into the possession of the valuable fur lined cape. Equally strange was the fact that she had come to think of the Mystery Lady in a new way. She found that she could no longer think of the lady as a thief.

"And yet," she mused, "what could have been her reason for haunting our store at that hour of the night? Why should she have left the cape?"

The cape. Ah yes, there was vexation enough in that! Too precious to be worn to work, it had hung for days in Lucile's closet while she had gone to work all too scantily clad in a sweater and broad scarf. She wished that she might have her own coat. Poor as it might be, it was at least her own and it was comfortable.

Next morning, having arrived at the door of the store a full fifteen minutes before the opening hour, the two girls were enjoying a few moments of window shopping before the gorgeous windows of State street. Suddenly, above the rattle of distant elevated trains and the honk of auto horns, Lucile caught clear and distinct the calling neigh of a horse.

Wheeling quickly about, she stared around her. True enough, there were still many horses on the streets of the city, but where before, in the din and rattle of the streets, had she caught that one clear call of a horse?

What she saw caused her to start and stare. Cordie was no longer at her side. Instead she was in imminent danger of being run down by a cab as she dashed madly across the street toward the spot where, like a statue in blue, a young policeman sat rigidly erect on his police horse.

The thing the girl did, once she had safely crossed the street, was even more surprising. Without the least glance at the young policeman,

she threw both arms about the horse's neck and hid her face in his mane.

Far from objecting to this unusual procedure, the horse appeared to rather enjoy it. As for the stern young minion of the law, he was so overcome by surprise that he did not altar his statue-like pose by so much as a movement of a finger.

Lucile flew across the street.

"Cordie! Cordie! What in the world are you doing?" she fairly screamed.

Paying not the least attention to this, Cordie repeated over and over: "Dick, you old darling. Dear old Dick. You knew me, Dick, you did! You did!"

This lasted for a full moment. Then, appearing to come to herself, the girl dropped her hands and stepped back upon the sidewalk.

One glance at the stern young officer, and a quite different emotion swept over her. Her face turned crimson as she stammered:

"Oh, what have I done? I — I beg — beg your pardon."

"It's all right," grinned the young man, coming to life with a broad smile. "Friend of yours, I take it?"

"Yes — Oh yes, — a very, very good friend."

"My name's Patrick O'Hara," there was a comradely tone now in the young officer's voice. "He's a friend of mine too, and a mighty good one. Shake." Solemnly drawing off his gauntlet, he swung half way out of his saddle to grasp the girl's hand.

"Thanks. Thanks awfully. Is this — this where you always stay? I — I'd like to see Dick real often."

"This is my beat; from here to the next cross street and back again. I'm here every morning from seven to one. We — we — Dick, I mean, will be glad to see you." The way he smiled as he looked at Cordie's deep colored, dimpled cheeks, her frank blue eyes, her crinkly hair, said plainer than words: "Dick won't be the only one who will be glad to see you."

"Lucile," implored Cordie, "I wish you'd do me a favor. I haven't a lump of sugar for poor

old Dick. I can't leave him this way. I — I never have. Won't you please talk to this — this policeman until I can go to the restaurant on the corner and get some?"

"It's all right, Miss — Miss ——"

"Cordie," prompted the girl.

"It's all right, Cordie," Patrick O'Hara grinned, "I'll not run away. Duty calls me, though. I must ride up a block and back again. I — I'll make it snappy. Be back before you are."

Touching Dick with his spurless heel and patting him gently on the neck, he went trotting away.

Five minutes later, the lump of sugar ceremony having been performed to the complete satisfaction of both Dick and Cordie, the girls hurried away to the scenes of their daily labors.

This little drama made a profound impression upon Lucile. For one thing, it convinced her that in spite of her expensive and stylish lingerie, Cordie was indeed a little country girl. "For," Lucille told herself, "that horse, Dick, came from the country. All horses do. He's been a

pet of Cordie's back there on the farm. His owner, perhaps her own father, has sold him to some city dealer. And because he is such a thorobred and such a fine up-standing beauty, he has been made a police horse. I don't blame her for loving him. Anyone would. But it shows what a splendid, affectionate girl she is."

"I'm sort of glad," she told herself a moment later, "that she's gotten acquainted with that young officer, Patrick O'Hara. He seems such a nice sort of boy, and then you can never tell how soon you're going to need a policeman as a friend; at least it seems so from what happened last night."

She might have shuddered a little had she known how prophetic these thoughts were. As it was, she merely smiled as she recalled once more how her impetuous little companion had raced across the streets to throw her arms about the neck of a horse ridden by a strange policeman.

"I wonder," she said finally, "I do wonder why Cordie does not confide in me? Oh well,"

she sighed, "I can only wait. The time will come."

Had she but known it, Cordie had reasons enough; the strangest sort of reasons, too.

It was in the forenoon of that same day that a rather surprising thing happened, a thing that doubled the mystery surrounding the attractive young salesman, Laurie.

Lucile was delivering a book to a customer. Laurie was waiting at the desk for change and at the same time whispering to Cordie, when of a sudden his eyes appeared ready to start from his head as he muttered:

"There's Sam!"

The next instant, leaving wrapped package, change and customer, he disappeared as if the floor had dropped from beneath him.

"Where's Laurie?" Cordie asked a moment later. "His customer's waiting for her change."

Though Lucile didn't know where he was, she was quite sure he would not return, at least he would not until a certain short, broad-shouldered man, who carried a large brief case and stood

talking to Rennie, had left the section. She felt very sure that Laurie wished to escape meeting this man.

"That man must be Sam," Lucile thought to herself as she volunteered to complete Laurie's sale. "Now I wonder what makes him so much afraid of that man!"

"He looks like a detective," she thought to herself as she got a better look at him. "No, he smiles too much for that. Must be a salesman trying to get Rennie to buy more books."

The conversation she overheard tended to confirm this last.

"Make it a thousand," he said with a smile.

"I won't do it!" Rennie threw her hands up in mock horror.

"Oh! All right," Sam smiled. "Anything you say."

Having been called away by a rush of customers, Lucile had quite forgotten both Laurie and Sam when she came suddenly upon the large brief case which Sam had carried. It was lying on her table.

"Whose is that?" a voice said over her shoulder. "That's Sam's, confound him! He's always leaving things about. Now he'll have to come back for it and I'll —"

"Who's Sam?" Lucile asked.

She turned about to receive the answer. The answer did not come. For a second time that day Laurie had vanished.

CHAPTER IX

HER DOUBLE

"Two more shopping days before Christmas," Lucile read these words in the paper on the following morning as she stepped into the elevator which was to take her to a day of strenuous labor. She read them and sighed. Then, of a sudden, she started and stared. The cause of this sudden change was the elevator girl.

"Why, Florence!" she exclaimed half incredulous. "You here?"

"Sure. Why not?" smiled the big, athletic looking girl who handled the elevator with skill.

"Well, I didn't know —"

"Didn't know I needed the money badly enough," laughed Florence. "Well, I do. Seems that one is always running out of cash, especially when it comes near to Christmas. I was getting short, so I came down here and

they gave me this job. Thought I could stand the rush I guess," she smiled as she put one arm about her former chum in a bear-like embrace.

If you have read our other books, "The Cruise of the O'Moo" and "The Secret Mark," you will remember that these two girls had been the best of chums. But a great University is a place of many changes. Their paths had crossed and then they had gone in diverging ways. Now they were more than pleased to find that, for a time, they were employed in the same store.

"Speaking of Christmas," said Florence, "since I haven't any grand Christmas surprises coming from other people, I've decided to buy myself a surprise."

"How can you do that?" asked Lucile, a look of incredulity on her face.

"Why, you see——"

"Here's my floor. See you later." Lucile sprang from the elevator and was away.

"It's nice to meet old friends," the elevator girl thought to herself as she went speeding up

the shaft, "especially when the holiday season is near. I must try to see more of Lucile."

Running an elevator in a department store is a dull task. Little enough adventure in that, you might say, except when your cable begins to slip with a full load on board. But Florence was destined to come under the spell of mystery and to experience thrilling adventure before her short service as an elevator girl came to an end.

Mystery came leaping at her right out of the morning. She left her car in the basement and went for a drink. She was gone but a second. When she came back the elevator door was closed and the cage cables in motion.

"Gone!" she whispered. "I never heard of such a thing. Who could have taken it?"

"Might have been the engineer taking it for a testing trip," she thought after a few seconds of deliberation. "But no, that doesn't seem probable. He'd not be down this early. But who could it be? And why did they do it?"

If the disappearance of her car had been

startling, the thing she witnessed three minutes later was many times more so.

With fast beating heart she saw the shadow of the car move down from fifth floor to fourth, from fourth to third, then saw the car itself cover the remaining distance to the basement.

Her knees trembled with excitement and fear as she watched the cage in its final drop. The excitement was born of curiosity; the fear was that this should mean the last of her position. She had never been discharged and this gave her an unwonted dread of it.

The car came to a stop at the bottom. Three passengers got off and one got on, and the car shot upward again. And Florence did nothing but stand there and stare in astonishment!

Had she seen a ghost, a ghost of herself? What had happened? Her head was in a whirl. The girl at the lever was herself. Broad shoulders, large hands, round cheeks, blue eyes, brown hair, even to freckles that yielded not to winters indoors. It was her own self, to the life.

"And yet," she reasoned, "here I am down here. What shall I do?"

As she faced the situation more calmly, she realized that the girl driving her car must be her double, her perfect double. She remembered reading somewhere that everyone in the world had a double. And here was hers. But why had her double made up her hair in her exact fashion, donned an elevator girl's uniform and taken her elevator from her?

"That is what I must find out," she told herself.

"There's no use making a scene by jumping in and demanding my cage," she reasoned, after a moment's reflection. "I'll just get on as a passenger and ride up with her."

There was something of a thrill in this affair. She was beginning to enjoy it.

"It's — why, it's fairly mysterious," she breathed.

In spite of all, she found herself anticipating the next move in the little drama. Driving an elevator was frightfully dull business. Going up

and down, up and down; answering innumerable questions all day long about the location of silks, shoes, baby rattle, nutmeg graters, boxing gloves, garters and fly-swatters — this was a dull task that tended to put one to sleep. And often enough, after her noon luncheon, she actually had to fight off sleep. But here, at last, was a touch of mystery, romance and adventure.

"My double," she breathed. "I'll find out who she is and why she did this, or die in the attempt."

Again the cage moved downward.

This time, as the last customer moved out of the door, she stepped in. Moving to the back of the car, she stood breathlessly waiting for the next move of her mysterious double.

The move did not come at once; in fact she had to wait there in the back of the car a surprisingly long time. The girl at the lever — her double — had poise, this was easy enough seen, and she had operated an elevator before, too. She brought the cage to its position at

each floor with an exactness and precision that could but be admired.

The cage filled at the first floor. It began to empty at the third. By the time they had reached the eleventh, only two passengers, beside Florence, remained in the back of the car. Only employees went beyond the eleventh; the floors above were stock rooms.

The girl at the lever threw back a fleeting glance. Florence thought she was about to speak, but she did not.

The car went to the thirteenth landing. There two people got off and three got on. Florence remained. The car dropped from floor to floor until they were again in the basement. Once more the mysterious double gave Florence a fleeting glance. She did not speak. Florence did not move from her place in the corner. The car rose again. To Florence the situation was growing tense, unbearable.

Again the car emptied. At the eleventh floor Florence found herself in the car alone with her double. This gave her a strange, frightened

feeling, but she resolutely held her place.

"Say!" exclaimed the girl, turning about as the car moved slowly upward. "Let me run your car, will you? Take my place, won't you? You won't have a thing to do. It — it'll be a lark." As she said all this in a whisper there was a tense eagerness on her face that Florence could not miss.

"But — but your car?" she managed to whisper back.

"Haven't any. Don't go on until tomorrow. Here's my locker key. Get — get my coat and furs and hat out and wear them. Stay in the store — Book Section and Rest Room. All you have to do.

"Only," she added as an afterthought, "if someone speaks to you, tells you something, you say, 'Oh! All right.' Just like that. And if they ask you what you said, you repeat. That's all you'll have to do."

"Oh, but I can't — "

"It isn't anything bad," the other girl put in hastily. There was a sort of desperate eager-

ness about the tense lines of her face. They were nearing the thirteenth floor. "Not a thing that's bad — nor — nor anything you wouldn't gladly do yourself. I — I'll explain some time. On — only do it, will you?"

They had reached the thirteenth floor. She pressed the key in Florence's reluctant hand.

A tall man, with an arm load of socks in bundles, got on the car. He looked at Florence. He looked at her double. Then he stared at both of them. After that his large mouth spread apart in a broad grin as he chuckled:

"Pretty good. Eh?"

Three minutes later Florence found herself in a kind of daze, standing at the tenth floor landing, staring down at her steadily dropping car.

"Oh, well," she whispered, shaking herself out of her daze, "sort of a lark, I suppose. No harm in it. Might as well have a half day off."

With that she turned and walked toward the locker room.

The coat and hat she took from the mysterious one's locker were very plain and somewhat worn,

not as good as her own. But the fur throw was a thing to marvel at; a crossed fox, the real thing, no dyed imitation, and so richly marked with gray that it might easily be taken for a silver gray.

"Some strange little combination," she breathed as she threw the fur about her neck and started once more for the elevator.

As a proof of the fact that she was carrying out her share of the compact, she waited for her own elevator. The strange girl shot her a quick smile as she entered and another as she got off on the third floor where was the rest room and book section.

"Seems terribly queer to be walking around in another girl's clothes," she whispered to herself as she drifted aimlessly past rows of people resting in leather cushioned chairs. "Especially when that other girl is someone you've spoken to but once in your life. I wonder — I do wonder why I did it?"

She meditated on this question until she had reached the book section.

"It was the look in her eyes; an eager, haunted look. She's all right, I'd swear to that, and she's in some sort of trouble that's not all her own fault. Trouble," she mused. "Part of our reason for being here in the world is that we may help others out of trouble. I — I guess I'm glad I did it."

Of this last she could not be sure. She had sometimes been mistaken, had bestowed confidence and assistance on persons who were unworthy. Should this girl prove to be such a person, then she might be helping her to get away with some unlawful act. And she might lose her position, too.

"Oh well," she sighed at last, "it's done. I'll lose my memory of it here among the books."

To one who is possessed of a real love for books, it is a simple task to forget all else in a room where there are thousands of them. So completely did Florence forget that she soon lost all consciousness of the role she was playing, and when a rough looking man with a seafaring roll to his walk came marching toward

her she could do nothing but stare at him. And when he said, "Howdy Meg," she only stared the harder.

"The train leaves at eleven thirty," he said, twisting his well worn cap in his nervous fingers.

"The — the — " she hesitated. Then of a sudden the words of the girl came back to her.

"Oh! All right," she said in as steady a tone as she could command.

"What say?" asked the man.

"I said 'Oh, all right.'"

"Right it is, then," he said and, turning about, disappeared behind a pile of books.

With her head in a whirl, the girl stood and stared after him.

"The train leaves at eleven thirty," she whispered. It was a few minutes past ten now. Should she go and tell the girl? She had not been instructed in this regard. What sort of an affair was this she was getting into, anyway? Was this girl hiding from her people, attempting to run away? The man had looked rough enough, but he had looked honest, too.

She had wandered about the place in uncertainty for another half hour. Then a kindly faced women, in a sort of uniform and a strange hat with gold lettered "Seaman's Rest" on its band, accosted her.

"Why, Meg!" she exclaimed. "You still here? The train leaves at eleven-thirty."

There it was again. This time she did not forget.

"Oh! All right!" she exclaimed and turning hurried away as if to make a train.

An hour later, still very much puzzled and not a little worried, she returned to the locker room, took off the borrowed clothes, gave the wonderful fox fur a loving pat, deposited it with the coat and hat, then locked the door.

After that she went to her own locker, put on her wraps preparatory to going to lunch, then walked over to the elevator.

A moment's wait brought her car to her. The other girl was still operating skillfully. Florence pressed the locker key into the girl's hand and stepped to the back of the car. Five

minutes later she found herself in the crisp air of a midwinter day.

"And to think," she whispered to herself, "that I'd do that for a total stranger."

As she ate her lunch a resolve, one of the strongest she had ever made, formed itself in her mind. She would become acquainted with her mysterious double and would learn her secret.

"The train leaves at eleven-thirty," she mused. "Well, wherever it might have been going, it's gone." She glanced at the clock which read twelve-fifteen.

And then, of a sudden, all thought of the other girl and her affairs was blotted out by a resolve she had made that very morning. This was Friday. Day after to-morrow was Christmas. She wanted a surprise on Christmas. She had started to tell Lucile about it that morning, but while just in the middle of the story the elevator had reached the Book Department and Lucile had hurried away. Soon after came the strange experience of meeting her double and

Florence had quite forgotten all about it until this very minute.

"Have to provide my own surprise," she said to herself, while thinking it through. "But how am I to surprise myself?"

This had taken a great deal of thinking, but in the end she hit upon the very thing. Her old travelling bag had gone completely to pieces on her last trip. Her father had sent her fifteen dollars for the purchase of a new one. She had the money still. She would buy a travelling bag with a surprise in it.

Only a few days before, a friend had told her how this might be done. Every great hotel has in its store room a great deal of baggage which no one claims; such as hat boxes, trunks, bags and bundles. Someone leaves his baggage as security for a bill. He does not return. Someone leaves his trunk in storage. He too disappears. Someone dies. In time all this baggage is sold at an auctioneer's place to the highest bidders. They have all been sealed when placed in the store room, and here they are,

trunks, bundles and bags, all to be sold with "contents if any."

"With contents if any." Florence had read that sentence over many times as she finished scanning the notice of an auction that was to be held that very afternoon and night.

"With contents if any," that was where her surprise was to come in. She would pick out a good bag that had a woman's name on it, or one that at least looked as if a woman had owned it, and she would bid it in. Then the bag would be hers, and the "contents if any." She thrilled at the thought. Her friend had told of diamond rings, of gold watches, of a string of pearls, of silks and satins and silver jewel boxes that had come from these mysterious sealed bags and trunks.

"Of course," Florence assured herself, "there won't be anything like that in my bag, but anyway there'll be a surprise. What fun it will be, on my birthday, to turn the key to the bag and to peep inside.

"I know the afternoon is going to drag ter-

ribly. I do wish I could go now," she sighed, "but I can't. I do hope they don't sell all the nice bags before I get there."

With this she rose from the table, paid her check and went back to her elevator, still wondering about her mysterious double and still dreaming of her birthday surprise.

CHAPTER X

CORDIE'S STRANGE RIDE

Twice a day, after Cordie had discovered him, the police horse, Dick, had a lump of sugar — one in the morning and another at noon. And Mounted Officer Patrick O'Hara, very young, quite handsome and somewhat dashing, received a smile with each lump of sugar. It would have been hard to tell which enjoyed his portion the most, Dick or Patrick O'Hara.

Apparently nothing could have pleased Cordie more than this discovery of an old friend. Yes, there was one other thing that would have pleased her much more. She found herself longing for it more and more. Every time she saw the horse she secretly yearned for this privilege.

And then, quite surprisingly, the opportunity came. It was noon. Having come out from

the store to give Dick his daily portion, she was surprised to find him standing alone, head down, and patiently waiting. A glance down the street told her there had been an auto collision in the middle of the block; not a serious one probably, as the cars did not seem badly smashed, but of course Patrick O'Hara had gone over there to take down the numbers. Since traffic had been jammed, he had dismounted and walked.

"Wha — what a chance," Cordie breathed, her heart skipping a beat. "Do I dare?"

She looked up at the splendid saddle with its broad circle of brass and other trappings. She studied Dick's smooth, sleek sides.

"I know I shouldn't," she whispered, "but I do so want to. Dick, do you suppose he'd care?"

The temptation was growing stronger. Glancing down the street, she caught a glimpse of Patrick O'Hara's cap above the crowd. His back was turned. The temptation was no longer to be resisted. With a touch and a spring, light as air, Cordie leaped into the saddle.

"Just for old times," she whispered.

She had meant to hover there for an instant, then to leap right down again. But alas for the best laid plans. Old Dick had apparently remembered things about the past which she had quite forgotten, and with a wild snort his head went up, his four feet came together, and with a leap that completely cleared him from the autos that blocked his way, he went tearing down the street.

For a second the girl's head was in a whirl. So unexpected was this mad dash that she was all but thrown from the saddle. Apparently an experienced rider, she regained her balance, clung to the pommel of the saddle for an instant, then gripping the reins, she screamed:

"Whoa, Dick! Whoa! Whoa!"

Had her scream been "Go Dick! Go!" it would not have had a different effect. He simply redoubled his speed.

Then it was that the State Street throng of shoppers viewed a performance that was not on the program and one they would not soon forget

— a hatless, coatless girl, hair flying, cheeks aflame, dashing madly down the street astride a sturdy police horse.

Some laughed, some cheered, others gasped in astonishment and fright. A corner policeman leaped for the reins, but missed. Panic spread through the cross streets. It was a bad morning for jay-walkers. Having failed to see the oncoming charger, they would leap boldly before a slow-moving auto to give one startled look upward, then to register the blankest surprise and shy suddenly backward. Had it not been such a serious business, Cordie would have laughed at the expressions on their faces; but this was no laughing matter. To all appearances she had stolen a policeman's horse, and that in broad daylight.

Suddenly a second police horse swung out into the street.

"Stop! Stop! I arrest you!" shouted the rider.

"That's easy said," the girl murmured in an agony of fear lest Dick should trample someone

under his feet. "It's easy said. I wish you would."

Evidently Dick did not agree with these sentiments, for the instant he sensed this rival his head went higher, a great snort escaped his nostrils and he was away with a fresh burst of speed which left the surprised officer three lengths behind.

"Oh! Oh! What shall I do!" groaned the girl.

The more she tugged at the reins the faster flew Dick's splendid limbs. He had the bit between his teeth.

Suddenly, as if aggravated by the crowds that threatened to block his way, he whirled to a side street and went dashing toward the Boulevard.

"The Boulevard! Oh, the Boulevard! We will be killed!"

Before them lay the Boulevard where autos, thick as bees in clover, raced forward at twenty miles an hour. What chance could there be of escape?

Trust a horse. While pedestrians stared and screamed in terror, while policemen vainly blew whistles and auto drivers set brakes screaming, Dick, without slackening his pace, raced ahead of a yellow limousine, grazed a black sedan, sent a flivver to the curb, and with one magnificent leap cleared the sidewalk and the low chain at its edge, landing squarely upon the soft, yielding turf of the park.

"Ah, that's better," he all but seemed to say. Then, heading south along the narrow park that extended straight away for a mile, he continued his mad career.

Cordie, risking one backward look, gasped in consternation and fear.

"Dick, Dick, you old villain! You've got me in for life! Never, never again!"

Three policemen, each mounted on his steed, came dashing after her in mad pursuit.

A straight, broad course lay before them; a pretty enough course to tempt anyone. Seeming to gain new strength from the very touch of it, Dick gripped his bit and fairly flew.

And Cordie, in spite of her predicament, regardless of impending arrest, was actually getting a thrill out of it. For one thing, there were now no pedestrians to be run down. The park was deserted. For another thing, ahead of Dick lay a clear stretch of turf which she hoped would satisfy his lust for speed.

Finding herself in a more cheerful frame of mind, Cordie took to studying her pursuers. That they were of different ages she guessed more by the way they rode than by a clear view of their faces; Dick had left them too far behind for that. The foremost rider was a man of thirty-five or so, a stern minion of the law, and he was plainly angry. It had been he who had informed her on State Street that she was arrested. He had an unusually long nose — she remembered that. He rode a poor mount very badly indeed. The punishment he was getting, as he jounced up and down in the saddle, he would doubtless attempt to pass on to her and to Dick. She ardently wished that he might never catch up, but realized at the same time

that it could not well be avoided. The race must come to a close.

The other policemen were different. One was heavy and well past middle age; the other young, perhaps no older than Patrick O'Hara. They rode with the easy grace of an aged and a young cowboy. She had seen some like that in the movies not so long ago. She fancied she saw a smile on the younger man's face. Perhaps he was enjoying the race. She sincerely hoped he might be, and the older man, too. As for the one of the long nose — not a chance.

All things have an end. Dick's race did. Having come close to an iron fence, beyond which towered a brick structure, he appeared to assume that he had reached the goal. Dropping to a slow trot, he circled gracefully to the right, and as he came to a standstill he threw his head high as much as to say:

"We won, didn't we; and by a handsome margin!"

"Yes, you old goose," the girl breathed. "And now, instead of a blue ribbon for you and

a purse for me, we get an invite to some dirty old police court."

There was no time for further thought. The foremost policeman, he of the long nose, rode up and snatching at the reins, snarled:

"Suppose you call that smart, you — you flapper!"

Staring angrily at the girl, he gave Dick's rein such a yank as threw the magnificent horse on his haunches.

Instantly Cordie's eyes flashed fire. They might take her to jail and welcome; but abuse Dick he might not!

Dick, however, proved quite equal to caring for himself. With a snort he leaped to one side, and jerking his rein from the policeman's grasp, went dashing away.

So sudden was this turn that Cordie, caught unawares, was thrown crashing to the ground. The officer wheeled and rode after the horse.

It was the older man, the one with gray about his temples, who, quickly dismounting, helped the girl to her feet.

"Are you hurt?" he asked in a tone that had a fatherly touch in it.

That did the trick for Cordie. All her anger was gone. She was not injured, but tears came trickling out from beneath her eyelids as she half sobbed:

"I — I'm sorry. Truly I am. I didn't, didn't mean to. Truly — truly I didn't! I — I used to ride him in races, on — on the farm. And I thought — thought it would be fun to just sit — sit a minute in his saddle. I tried it and I guess — guess he thought it was to be another race. Anyway, he — he bolted with me and I couldn't stop him. Truly, truly I couldn't!"

"That's all right, Miss," said the elderly one, putting a fatherly hand on her shoulder. "It may not be so bad, after all."

The younger policeman had also dismounted and now stood smiling at them and appearing to wish he might take the place of his older friend.

"That is Pat O'Hara's horse," he said at last. "He's the smartest mount on the force. And I'll tell you one thing, if we wait for Hogan to

catch him we'll be here until to-morrow morning."

Hogan, the irate policeman, was certainly having his troubles catching Dick. With the skill and mischief of a trained performer, Dick was playing tag with him in a masterly fashion. He would stand with head down as if asleep until his pursuer was all but upon him; then with a snort he would dash away. No amount of coaxing, cajoling or cursing could bring him any nearer to capture.

This little play went on for several minutes. Then, at a time when Dick had circled quite close to her, Cordie suddenly put two fingers to her lips and let out a shrill whistle. Instantly the splendid horse pricked up his ears and came trotting toward her.

"Good old Dick," she whispered, patting him on the neck and not so much as putting out a hand for his rein.

"Well I'll be—" mumbled the younger policeman.

"There's lots like 'em, both horses and girls,"

the old man smiled, "and I'll swear there's not more bad in the girl than the horse."

"No, now Hogan," he held up a warning hand to the one who came riding up. "You leave this to me. Where's O'Hara's stand?"

"State and Madison," volunteered the younger man.

"Good, we're off. You men can ride back to your posts. I'll tend to this matter myself."

The younger man grinned. Hogan growled; then they rode away.

"You better mount and ride back," suggested the older man to Cordie.

Seeing her hesitate, he reached for her rein, "I'll steady him a bit, but he's had his race. Guess he'll be satisfied. But," he said suddenly, "you're not dressed for this. You must be half frozen."

Unstrapping a great coat from Patrick O'Hara's saddle, he helped her into it and together they rode away.

And so it happened that on this day, only a few days before Christmas, the throngs along

State Street viewed a second unusual sight. Though quite different from the first, it was no less mystifying. Who ever heard of a gray haired policeman and a bobbed haired girl in a policeman's great coat, riding police horses and parading up the city's most congested street in broad daylight?

"What a fool I've been," the girl whispered to herself as she hid her face from a camera. "It will all be in the papers. And then what?"

They found young Patrick O'Hara nervously pacing his beat on foot. His face lit up with a broad grin as he saw them approaching.

"I sort of figured," he drawled, "that whoever took Dick would bring him back. Can't anybody do a good job of riding him except me."

"If you think that," exclaimed Tim Reilly, the elderly policeman, "you just take any horse on the force, give this girl and Dick a three-length start, and see if you'd catch 'em. You would — not! Not in a thousand moons!"

Patrick O'Hara grinned as he helped the girl down.

"Now you beat it," said Tim in as stern a voice as he could command. "I suspect you work around here somewhere close. You've overdone your noon hour, and this the rush season. You'll be in for it now."

Cordie threw him one uncertain glance to discover whether or not he was in earnest. The next moment she went racing across the street.

CHAPTER XI

AS SEEN FROM THE STAIRWAY

"Where in the world have you been?" Lucile exclaimed, pouncing upon Cordie as soon as she came in sight. "Rennie's been worrying her poor old head off about you, and Miss Mones, who's in charge of the checking girls, is furious."

"Oh," Cordie drawled, "I was out to lunch. Then I took a spin down the park on my favorite steed. It's a won-der-ful day outside."

"You'll have a lot of time to spend outside," scolded Lucile, "if you don't get right back to your stand."

A moment later, having somehow made her peace with Miss Mones, Cordie was back at her task, rustling paper and snipping cord.

Late that afternoon Lucile was sent to the twelfth floor storeroom to look up a special

order. She enjoyed these trips to the upper realms. This vast storeroom was like a new world to her. As she walked down long, narrow, silent aisles, on either side of which were wired in compartments piled high with every conceivable form of merchandise: rugs, piano lamps, dolls, dishes, couches, clothes-pins, and who knows what others, she could not help feeling that she was in the store house of the world, that she was queen of this little ward and that there remained only for her to say the word and a house would be handsomely furnished, a beautiful bride outfitted with a trousseau, or a Christmas tree decorated for a score of happy children. Yes, these aisles held a charm and fascination all their own. She liked the silence of the place, too. After the hours of listening to the constant babble of voices, the murmur of shoppers, the call of clerks, the answers of floormen, this place seemed the heart of silent woods at night.

Captivated by such thoughts as these, and having located the missing books and started

them on their journey down the elevator, she decided to walk down the nine flights to her own floor.

Here, too, as she skipped lightly down from floor to floor, she caught little intimate glimpses of the various lives that were being lived in this little world of which she was for a time a part. Here a score of printing presses and box making machines were cutting, shaping and printing containers for all manner of holiday goods. The constant rush of wheels, the press and thump of things, the wrinkles on the brows of operators, all told at what a feverish heat the work was being pushed forward.

One floor lower down the same feverish pace was being set. Here nimble fingers dipped and packed chocolate bon-bons, while from the right and left of them came the rattle and thump of drums polishing jelly beans and moulding gum drops at the rate of ten thousand a minute.

Ah yes, there was the Christmas rush for you. But one floor lower down there was quiet and composure such as one might hope to find

in a meadow where a single artist, with easel set, sketches a landscape. It was not unlike that either, for the two-score of persons engaged here were sketching, too. The sketches they made with pen and ink and water-colors were not unattractive. Drawings of house interiors they were; here the heavily furnished office of some money king, and there the light and airy boudoir of one of society's queens; here the modest compartment of a young architect who, though of only average means, enjoyed having things done right, and there the many roomed mansion of a steel magnate. These sketches were made and then shown to the prospective customer. The customer offered suggestions, made slight changes, then nodded, wrote a check, and a sale amounting to thousands of dollars was completed.

"That must be fascinating work," Lucile whispered to herself as an artistic looking young woman showed a finished sketch to a customer. "I think I'd like that. I believe ——"

With a sudden shock her thoughts were cut

short. Two persons had entered the glassed-in compartment — a woman of thirty and a girl in her late teens. And of all persons!

"The Mystery Lady and Cordie! It can't be," she breathed, "and yet it is!"

It was, too. None other. What was stranger still, they appeared to have business here. At sight of them one of the artists arose and lifting a drawing which had been standing face to the wall, held it out for their inspection.

Cordie clasped her hands in very evident ecstacy of delight, and, if Lucile read her lips aright, she exclaimed:

"How perfectly wonderful!"

The expression on the Mystery Lady's face said plainer than words, "I hoped you'd like it."

The sketch, Lucile could see plainly enough from where she stood, was a girl's room. There was a bed with draperies, a study table of slender-legged mahogany, a dresser, one great comfortable chair surprisingly like Lucile's own, some simpler chairs of exquisite design. These

furnishings, and such others as only a girl would love, were done in the gay tints that appeal to the springtime of youth.

"Cordie?" Lucile stared incredulously. "A simple country girl, what can she know about such things? That room — why those furnishings would cost hundreds of dollars. It's absurd, impossible; and yet there they are — she and the Mystery Lady."

The Mystery Lady! At thought of her, Lucile was seized with an almost uncontrollable desire to rush down there and demand the meaning of that lady's many strange doings. But something held her back. So Cordie was acquainted with the Mystery Lady! Here was something strange. Indeed, Lucile was beginning to wonder a great deal about Cordie.

"She has her secrets, little Cordie!" exclaimed Lucile. "Who would have thought it?"

Perhaps it is not strange that Lucile did not feel warranted in breaking in upon those secrets. So there she stood, irresolute, until the two of them had left the room and lost themselves in

the throngs that crowded every aisle of this great mart of trade.

"Now," Lucile sighed, "I shan't ever feel quite the same about Cordie. I suppose, though, she has a right to her secrets. What could she possibly know about interior decorating and furnishing? Perhaps more than I would guess. But a country girl? What does she know about the Mystery Lady? Little, or much? Have they known each other long? I — I'll ask her. No —, n-o-o, I guess I won't. I wasn't supposed to see. It was too much like spying. No," this decisively, "I'll just have to let things work themselves out. And if they don't work out to something like a revelation, then I'll know they haven't, that's all. More than half the mysteries of the world are never unravelled at all."

After this bit of reasoning, she hastened on down the remaining flights of stairs to her work.

"Where's Cordie?" she asked of Laurie.

"Out on a shopping pass. Swell looking dame came in and called for her." There was a knowing grin on Laurie's face as he said this,

but Lucile, who had turned to her work, did not notice it.

Cordie returned a few moments later, but not one word did she let fall regarding her shopping mission.

CHAPTER XII

SILVER GRAY TREASURE

"What do you think!" exclaimed Cordie. "It was such a strange thing to happen. I just have to tell some one, or I'll burst. I daren't tell Lucile. I am afraid she'd scold me."

James, the mysterious seaman who carried bundles in the book department, looked at her and smiled.

"I've heard a lot of stories in my life, and them that wasn't to be repeated, wasn't. If you've got a yarn to file away in the pigeon holes of somebody's brain, why file it with me."

She had come upon James while on the way from the cloak room. She would have to wait a full half hour before Lucile would have finished her work, and she felt that she just must tell some one of her thrilling adventure with Dick and the policeman.

Seated on the edge of a table, feet dangling and fingers beating time to the music of her story, she told James of this thrilling adventure.

"You came out well enough at that," he chuckled when she had finished. "Lots better'n I did the last time I mixed into things."

Cordie wondered if this remark had reference to his chase after the hawk-eyed young man who had followed her to the furnace room that night. But asking no questions, she just waited.

"Funny trip, that last sea voyage I took," James mused at last, his eyes half closed. "It wouldn't have been half bad if it hadn't been for one vile crook.

"You see," he went on, "sometimes of a summer I run up to Nome. I've always had a few hundred dollars, that is up until now. I'd go up there in the north and sort of wander round on gasoline schooners and river boats, buyin' up skins; red, white, cross fox, and maybe a silver gray or two. Minks and martin too, and ermine and Siberian squirrel.

"Always had a love for real furs; you know

what I mean, the genuine stuff that stands up straight and fluffy and can't be got anywhere far south of the Arctic Circle — things like the fox skin that's on that cape your pal Lucile wears sometimes. When I see all these pretty girls wearin' rabbit skin coats, it makes me feel sort of bad. Why, even the Eskimos do better than that! They dress their women in fawn skin; mighty pretty they are, too, sometimes.

"Well, last summer I went up to Nome, that's in Alaska, you know, and from there I took a sort of pirate schooner that ranges up and down the coast of Alaska and into Russian waters."

"Pirate," breathed Cordie, but James didn't hear her.

"We touched at a point or two," he went on, "then went over into Russian waters for walrus hunting — ivory and skins.

"We ran into a big herd and filled the boat up, then touched at East Cape, Siberia.

"There wasn't any real Russians there, so

we went up to the native village. Old Nepassok, the chief, seemed to take a liking to me. He took me into his storeroom and showed me all his treasure — walrus and mastodon ivory, whale bone, red and white fox skins by the hundred, and some mink and beaver. Then at last he pulled out an oily cotton bag from somewhere far back in the corner and drew out of it — what do you think? The most perfect brace of silver fox skins I have ever seen! Black beauties, they were, with maybe a white hair for every square inch. Just enough for contrast. Know who wears skins like that? Only the very wealthiest people.

"And there I was looking at them, worth a king's ransom, and maybe I could buy them."

"Could you?" breathed Cordie.

"I could, and did. It took me four hours. The chief was a hard nut to crack. He left me just enough to get back to Chicago, but what did I care? I had a fortune, one you could carry in two fair sized overcoat pockets, but a fortune all the same.

"I got to Chicago with them," he leaned forward impressively, "and then a barber — a dark faced, hawk-eyed barber — done me out of them. Of course he was a crook, just playing barber. Probably learned the trade in jail. Anyway he done me for my fortune. Cut my hair, he did, and somehow got the fox skins out of my bag. When I got to my hotel all I had in my bag was a few clothes and a ten dollar gold piece. I raced back to the barber shop but he was gone; drawed his pay and skipped, that quick.

"That," he finished, allowing his shoulders to drop into a slouch, "is why I'm carrying books here. I have to, or starve. Just what comes after Christmas I can't guess. It's not so easy to pick up a job after the holidays.

"But do you know — " he sat up straight and there was a gleam in his eye, "do you know when I saw that barber fellow last?"

"Where?"

"Down below the sub-basement of this store, in the boiler room at night."

"Not — not the one who was following me?"

"The same. And I nearly got him, but not quite."

"You — you didn't get him?"

Cordie hardly knew whether to be sorry or glad. She hated violence; also she had no love for that man.

"I did not get him," breathed James, "but next time I will, and what I'll say and do for him will be for both you and me. G'night!" He rose abruptly and, shoulders square, gait steady and strong, he walked away.

"What are you dreaming about?" Lucile asked as she came upon Cordie five minutes later.

"Nothing much, I guess. Thinking through a story I just heard, that's all."

CHAPTER XIII

LUCILE'S DREAM

That evening on the L train Lucile read a copy of the morning paper, one which she had carefully saved for a very definite reason. It was the paper which was exploiting the Lady of the Christmas Spirit. Lucile always got a thrill out of reading about the latest doings of that adventurous person who had managed to be everywhere, to mingle with great throngs, and yet to be recognized by no one.

"Well, I declare!" she whispered to herself as a fresh thrill ran through her being. "She was to be in our store this very afternoon; in the art room of the furniture store. That's the very room in which I saw Cordie and the Mystery Lady. This Lady of the Christmas Spirit may have been in the room at that exact moment. How very, very exciting!"

Closing her eyes, she tried to see that room again; to call back pictures of ladies who had entered the room while she had been looking down upon it.

"No," she thought at last, "there isn't one that fits; one was tall and ugly, one short, stout and middle aged, and two were quite gray. Not one fits the description of this Christmas Spirit person; unless, unless —" her heart skipped a beat. She had thought of the Mystery Lady.

"But of course it couldn't be," she reasoned at last. "It doesn't say she was to be there at that very moment. I was not standing on the stair more than ten minutes. There are six such periods in an hour and nine and a half working hours in a store day. Fine chance! One chance in fifty. And yet, stranger things have happened. What if it were she! What ——"

Her dreamings were broken short off by the sudden crumpling of paper at her side. Cordie had been glancing over the evening paper. Now the paper had entirely disappeared,

and Cordie's face was crimson to the roots of her hair.

"Why Cordie, what's happened?" exclaimed Lucile.

"Noth — nothing's happened," said Cordie, looking suddenly out of the window.

That was all Lucile could get out of her. One thing seemed strange, however. At the stand by the foot of the elevated station Cordie bought two copies of the same paper she had been reading on the train. These she folded up into a solid bundle and packed tightly under her arm.

"I wonder why she did that?" Lucile thought to herself.

As often happens in bachelor ladies' apartments, this night there was nothing to be found in their larder save sugar, milk and cocoa.

"You get the cocoa to a boil," said Lucile, "and I'll run over to the delicatessen for something hot. I'm really hungry to-night." She was down the stairs and away.

Somewhat to her annoyance, she found the delicatessen packed with students waiting their turn to be supplied with eatables. The term had ended, and those who were too far from home to take the holidays away from the University were boarding themselves.

After sinking rather wearily into a corner seat, Lucile found her mind slipping back over the days that had just flown.

"To-morrow," she told herself soberly, "is the day before Christmas. It is my last day at the store. And then? Oh, bother the 'and then'! There's always a future, and always it comes out somehow."

That she might not be depressed by thoughts of the low state of her finances, she filled her mind with day dreams. In these dreams she saw herself insisting that Cordie reveal to her the secret hiding place of the Mystery Lady. Having searched this lady out, she demanded the return of her well worn, but comfortable, coat. In the dream still she saw the lady throw up her hands to exclaim:

"That frayed thing? I gave it to the rag man!"

Then in a rage she, Lucile, stamps her foot and says: "How could you! Of course now I shall keep your cape of fox skin and Siberian squirrel."

"Ah," she whispered, "that was a beautiful dream!"

Glancing up, she saw there were still six customers ahead of her and she must wait for her turn.

"Time for another," she whispered.

This time it was the Lady of the Christmas Spirit. She saw her among the throngs at the store. Feeling sure that this must be the very person, that she might steal a look at her hands, she followed her from department to department. Upstairs and downstairs they went. More than once she caught the lady throwing back a mocking glance at her.

Then, of a sudden, at the ribbon counter she caught sight of her hands.

"Such hands!" she whispered. "There

never were others like them. It is the Lady of the Christmas Spirit."

Putting out her own hand, she grasped one of the marvelous ones as she whispered: "You are the Lady of the Christmas Spirit."

At once there came a mighty jingle of gold. A perfect shower of gold went sparkling and tinkling to the floor.

"Oh! Oh!—Oh! It will all be lost!" she cried, leaping forward.

She leaped almost into the delicatessen keeper's arms. To her surprise she saw that the store was empty. Her day-dream had ended in a real dream; she had fallen asleep.

Hastily collecting her scattered senses, she selected a steaming pot of beans and a generous cylinder of brown bread, then drawing her scarf about her, dashed out into the night.

CHAPTER XIV

THE NEWSPAPER PICTURE

Lucile may have been dreaming, but Cordie was wide awake and thinking hard. The instant Lucile had closed the door behind her she had spread one of the papers she had bought out before her and, having opened it at page 3, sat down to look at a picture reproduced there.

For a full two minutes she sat staring at it.

"Well anyway, it's not such a bad picture," she chuckled at last.

After the chuckle her face took on a sober look.

Then suddenly she exclaimed: "Let's see what they say about it!"

"Well of all things! Nothing but a line of question marks! Well, at least the reporters know nothing about it."

For a moment she stared at the long line of

interrogation points, then her face dimpled with a smile.

"Just think," she murmured. "They never whispered one word! Not one of them all! Not Patrick O'Hara, nor the old one they called Tim, nor the young one, nor even Hogan, who was so angry at me. And I'll bet the reporters begged and tempted them in every way they could think of. What wonderful good sports policemen must be. I — I'd like to hug every one of them!"

Then she went skipping across the floor and back again, then paused and stared again at the picture.

Truth was, all unknown to her, and certainly very much against her wishes, Cordie's picture had gotten into the paper. This was the picture she was still staring at: Crowds thronging State Street, a gray-haired mounted policeman, and by his side, also riding a police horse, a bobbed haired young girl in a policeman's great coat.

"What if they see it!" she murmured.

"They wouldn't let me stay. They will see it too — of course they will."

"But then, what does it matter?" she exclaimed a moment later. "To-morrow's the day before Christmas. What will I care after that?"

Hearing steps on the stairs, she hastily tore a page out of each of the two papers, folded them carefully and thrust them into a drawer. Then she threw the remaining part of the paper into the waste basket.

"To-morrow is the day before Christmas," whispered Lucile as two hours later she sat staring rather moodily at the figures in the worn carpet. "A great Christmas, I suppose, for some people. Doesn't look like it would be much for me. With term bills and room rent staring me in the face, and only a few dollars for paying them, it certainly doesn't look good. And here I am with this little pet of mine sleeping on me and eating on me, and apparently no honest way of getting rid of her." She shook

her finger at the bed where Cordie was sleeping.

"If only you were an angora cat," she chided, still looking at the dreaming girl, "I might sell you. Even a canary would be better — he'd make no extra room rent and he'd eat very little."

"And yet," she mused, "am I sorry? I should say I'm not! It's a long, long life, and somehow we'll struggle through."

"Christmas," she mused again. "It will be a great Christmas for some people, be a wonderful one for Jefrey Farnsworth — that is, it will be if he's still alive. I wonder when they'll find him, and where? They say we've sold two thousand of his books this season. Think of it!"

After that she sat wondering in a vague and dreamy way about many things. Printed pages relating to the Lady of the Christmas Spirit floated before her mind's vision to be followed by a picture of Cordie and the Mystery Lady in the art room of the furnishings department. Cordie's iron ring, set with a diamond, glimmered on the strange, long, muscular fingers of

a hand. Laurie sold the last copy of "Blue Flames." Jefrey Farnsworth, in the manner she had always pictured him, tall, dark, with deep-set eyes and a stern face wrinkled by much mental labor, stood before an audience of women and made a speech. Yellow gold glittered, then spread out like a molten stream. With a start she shook herself into wakefulness. Once more she had fallen asleep.

"Christmas," she whispered as she crept into bed. "To-morrow is the day before ——"

CHAPTER XV

"WITH CONTENTS, IF ANY"

In the meantime Florence had come upon an adventure. The place she entered a half hour after quitting time was a great barn-like room where dark shadows lurked in every corner but one. The huge stacks of bags and trunks that loomed up indistinctly in those dark corners made the place seem the baggage room of some terminal railway depot.

As she joined the throng in the one light corner of the room she was treated to another little thrill. Such a motley throng as it was. Jewish second-hand dealers, short ones, tall ones, long-bearded ones; men of all races. And there were two or three women, and not a few vagabonds of the street, who had come in for no other purpose than to get out of the cold. Such were those who crowded round the high stand

where, with gavel in hand, the auctioneer cried the sale:

"How much am I bid? Ten dollars! Thank you. Ten I have. Who'll make it eleven! 'Leven, 'leven, 'leven. Who'll make it twelve?"

There was not an attractive face in the group that surrounded the block. Florence was tempted to run away; but recalling the surprise she had promised herself, she stayed.

Presently her eyes fell upon a face that attracted her, the kindly, gentle face of a woman in her thirties. She was seated at a desk, writing.

"She's the clerk of the sale," Florence thought. "They're selling trunks now. She may be able to tell me when they will sell bags."

She moved over close to the desk and timidly put her question.

"Do you really want one of those bags?" the woman asked, surprise showing in her tone.

"Yes. Why not?" the girl asked.

"No reason at all, I guess," said the clerk.

Then, after looking at Florence for a moment, a comradely smile spread over her face.

"Come up close," she beckoned. "He'll be selling bags in fifteen minutes or so," she whispered. "Sit down here and wait. Why do you want one of those bags so badly?"

"I — I need one," said Florence.

"That's not all the reason."

"No — not — not all," Florence hesitated, then told her frankly of the surprise she had planned for herself.

The woman's face became almost motherly as she finished.

"I'll tell you what to do," she whispered. "There are just five bags to be sold in the next lot. You won't want the first one. She — the woman who owned it, died."

"Oh, no," Florence whispered.

"You won't get the second nor the third. That long bearded Jew, and the slim, dark man standing by the post, will run them high if they have to. They know something about them."

"How — how — "

"How did they find out? I don't know, but they did. The last two bags are quite good ones, good as you would purchase new for fifteen or twenty dollars, and I shouldn't wonder," she winked an eye ever so slightly, "I shouldn't wonder a bit if there'd be a real surprise in one of them for you. There now, dearie," she smiled, "run over and look at them, over there beside the green trunk. And don't whisper a word of what I have told you.

"The one nearest the block will be sold first, and the others just as they come," she added as the girl rose to go.

Making her way around the outskirts of the crowd, Florence walked over to the place of the green trunk. The bags were all good, and most of them nearly new. Any one of them, she concluded, would see her safely through college, and that was all that mattered. Then, lest she attract too much attention, she slunk away into a dark corner.

Her heart skipped a beat when the first bag was put up. Her hopes fell when she saw it

sell for thirty-two dollars. Her little roll of fifteen dollars seemed to grow exceedingly small as she clutched it in her right hand. Was her dream of a surprise for Christmas morning only a dream? It would seem so, for the second and third bags also sold for a high figure. But, recalling the little lady's advice, she kept up her courage.

"How much am I bid?" said the auctioneer as the fourth bag was handed him. Florence caught her breath. She tried to say "Ten dollars," but her tongue stuck to the roof of her mouth. A round faced man relieved her of the task. The bag went to eleven dollars, then twelve. Then it came to a halt, giving time for Florence to regain her voice.

"Twelve and a half," her voice seemed piping and thin in that great place. But the auctioneer got it.

"Thank you. Twelve and a half, a half, a half."

"Thirteen! Thank you. Thirteen I have. Now the half," he nodded to Florence and she

nodded back, "And a half, I have it. And a half. Now fourteen. Thirteen and a half. Now make it fourteen."

"Fourteen," someone shouted. Again the girl's heart sank. What was the use?

"And a half?" The auctioneer nodded at her and she nodded back.

"Now fifteen. Now fifteen. Now fifteen," he shouted hoarsely. "Who'll make it fifteen? Fifteen once. Fifteen twice!" Florence crushed her money into a solid mass, "Fifteen three times, and SOLD to the young lady in blue!" His gavel came down with a bang.

Scarcely believing her senses, the girl groped her way forward to receive the bag, then hurried over to the desk.

"You got it?" smiled the clerk. "Here's hoping it's a beautiful, wonderful surprise!" she whispered as she pressed a lonely half dollar into the palm of her hand.

Curiosity regarding the price that would be bid for the last bag of the lot held Florence to the spot for the space of three minutes. And

that was a bit of curiosity which she was destined to regret.

As she stood there listening to the bids she could not help but notice a dark man, with burning, hawk-like eyes hurry into the place, glance frantically about, race back to the place where the five bags had been, then stand stock still. His dark eyes roved about the place until they came to rest on one spot and that spot was the one occupied by the bag which Florence held in her hand. From that time until she left the room, although he pretended to be looking at everything else, she was sure his eyes did not leave that bag for a space of more than five seconds at any one time. The cold glitter of his eyes made her feel strangely weak at the knees.

She had not gone twenty rods from the place when she heard footsteps behind her. Looking back, she saw that same small dark man coming behind her.

"Just happened to come out then," she tried to reassure herself. But it was no use. Some-

thing within her told her that she was being followed, followed on the deserted city streets at night.

At once a mad procession of questions began racing through her mind. Who was this man? Was it the bag he wanted? Why? What did he know about the bag? What did it really contain? To none of these questions could she form an adequate answer. Only one thing stood out clearly in her mind — the bag was hers. She had come by it in an honest manner. The hotel had a right to give it to the auctioneer to sell. She had a right to purchase it. She had paid for it. She had the bill of sale. It was rightfully hers.

But even as these thoughts crystallized in her mind she realized that she was desperately afraid. The man with his burning black eyes was enough to inspire fear, and added to that it was night.

" What am I to do? " she asked herself. " The elevated station is only two blocks ahead, but he will board the train I take. He will follow

me after I get off and there are five desolate blocks to travel to my room."

Suddenly a solution came to her. Just before her was the entrance to the LaSalle Street Railway Station. Why not walk in there and leave the bag at the checking room? She could return for it in the morning and carry it to the store where she could check it again and leave it until closing time.

No sooner thought than done. Five minutes later, looking neither to right nor left, she walked demurely out of the station. She did not know what had become of her pursuer, and she did not care. The bag was safe. He could not get it, and aside from that, what did he care for her, an elevator girl going home from work? Very evidently he cared nothing at all, for she did not see him again that night.

"Fooled him," she smiled to herself as she settled herself comfortably in a seat where she might watch the winter whitened city speed past her. "That's the last I'll ever see of him."

In coming to this conclusion she overlooked one trifling detail. Since the night was cold, she had worn beneath her coat her elevator girl's uniform. The auction room was warm. While there she had unbuttoned her coat, displaying plainly the uniform and the monogrammed buttons on it. The greatest of stores employ few enough elevator girls. To visit each bank of elevators and to get a look at each girl is but the work of an hour or two at most. The man would have no trouble in locating her if he cared to do so. Since she had not thought of this she rode home humming in a carefree manner and, after a meal of sandwiches, cocoa and pie, followed by an hour of reading, she went to bed to dream of mysterious treasures taken by the truck load from the depths of a heavy, dark brown travelling bag.

She awoke in the morning with a pleasing sense of mystery and anticipation lurking about in the shadowy corners of her brain.

Leaping from bed, she went through a series of wild calesthenics which set every ounce of

blood in her veins racing away with new life.

An hour later, with a little suppressed feeling of excitement tugging at her heart and with fingers that trembled slightly, she passed her check over the counter at the depot. She had some slight feeling that it had all been a dream. But no, there it was, her mysterious bag, as big and handsome as ever. It was quite light, but she felt sure it was not empty. What could it contain? She was tempted to draw the key from her pocket then and there and have a peek. But no — to-morrow was Christmas. She could wait. So, seizing the bag, she hurried away to her work.

Once the bag was checked at the store and she back at her lever in the cage that went up and down, up and down all day, she found herself thinking of that other girl, the mysterious double of hers. Where was she to-day? Had she really gone to work, or had she vanished? What manner of plot had she been mixed up in? What train had gone at eleven-thirty? Whose train? Was that girl supposed to go?

If so, why did she not wish to go? Where did she live? Who was she anyway?

While the elevator went up and down, up and down, these questions, and a score of others, kept revolving themselves in her mind. At last she found herself forming a firm resolve that should she happen upon her mysterious double again she most certainly would keep in touch with her until she found out more about her.

She saw her mysterious double shortly after she had gone to work, but under conditions which gave her no opportunity to either study or question her. The girl, dressed in her uniform and apparently ready to go to work, was standing before the bank of elevators on the thirteenth floor. She had been talking in low and excited tones to a tall, square shouldered man who, in spite of the fact that he was on a floor of this great store where only employees are allowed, had in his bearing and walk something that spoke strongly of boats and the sea.

"He's been a captain or a mate or some-

thing," Florence said to herself as she sent her cage speeding downward. "I wonder if that girl belongs to the sea."

CHAPTER XVI

A GREAT DAY

"The day before Christmas! Oh joy! Joy! Joy!"

Lucile leaped out of bed. Throwing off her dream-robe, she went whirling about the room for all the world as if she were playing roll the hoop and she were the hoop.

The day before Christmas! Who cared if room rent was due to-night? Who cared if the school term loomed ahead with little enough cash in her stocking to smooth its way? Who cared about anything? It was the day before Christmas.

This day work would be light. Tommie had said that. Donnie had said it. Rennie and all the others of the sales group who stayed from year to year had said it. What was more, for this one day, if never again, Lucile had resolved

to wear the magnificent cape of midnight blue and fox-skin. And at night, when the day was done, the week ended, the season closed, there was to be a wonderful party. A party! Oh joy! A party!

Laurie, the mysterious Laurie Seymour, had invited them, just they of his corner — Donnie and Rennie, Tommie, Cordie and herself.

A grand party it was to be, a supper at Henrici's and after that Laurie was to take them to a symphony concert! And to this party she would wear the midnight blue cape. For one night, one reckless, joyous night, she would travel in the height of style. And then?

"Oh, bother the 'and then'! It's the day before Christmas!" She went through another series of wild whirls that landed her beneath the shower.

When at last she was fully dressed for this last day of work in the book department, Lucile drew on the cape. Then, having told Cordie that she would wait for her outside, she went skipping down the stairs.

It was one of those crisp, snappy, frosty mornings of winter that invite you to inhale deeply of its clear, liquid-like air.

After taking three deep breaths Lucile buried her radiant face in the warm depths of the fox skin.

"How gorgeous," she murmured. "Oh, that I might own it forever!"

Even as she said this all the unanswered questions that grouped themselves about the cape — its owner, and the girl's associates at the store — came trooping back to puzzle her. Who was the Mystery Lady? Why had she left the cape that night? Why did she not return for it later? How had it happened that she was in the store that night at two hours before midnight? Who was Laurie Seymour? Why had he given the Mystery Lady his pass-out? How had he spent that night? What had happened to the vanished author of "Blue Flames"? Who was Cordie? Was she really the poor, innocent little country girl she had thought her? What was to come of her, once the season had

closed? Who was the "Spirit of Christmas"? Had she ever seen her? Who would get the two hundred in gold? What had she meant by the crimson trail she left behind? Who was Sam? Why was Laurie so much afraid to meet him? Above all, what were the secrets of the crimson thread and the diamond set iron ring?

Surely here were problems enough to put wrinkles in any brow. But it was the day before Christmas, so, as Cordie came dancing down to a place beside her, Lucile gripped her arm and led away in a sort of hop-skip-and-jump that brought them up breathless at the station.

There was just time to grab a paper before the train came rattling in. Having secured a seat, Lucile hid herself behind her paper. A moment later she was glad for the paper's protection. Had it not been for the paper she felt that half the people on the train might have read her thoughts.

The thing she saw in the Spirit of Christmas column, which daily told of the doings of the

lady by that name, was such a startling revelation that she barely escaped a shriek as her eyes fell on it.

"You have been wondering," she read in the column devoted to the lady of the "Christmas Spirit," "what I have been meaning by the crimson trail which I have left behind. Perhaps some of you have guessed the secret. If this is true, you have made little use of that knowledge. None of you have found me. Not one of the hundreds of thousands who have passed me has paused to grip my hand and to whisper: 'You are the Spirit of Christmas.'

"Now I will give you some fresh revelations. It is the day before Christmas. At midnight to-night Christmas comes. As the clock strikes that magic hour my wanderings cease. If no one has claimed my gold by then, no one will.

"I have told you always that hands ofttimes express more than a face. This is true of my hands. They are strange hands. Stranger still are the rings I wear upon them. For days now I have worn an iron ring set with a dia-

mond. Had someone noticed this, read the secret and whispered: 'You are the Spirit of Christmas,' not only should my gold have clinked for him, but the diamond should have been his as well."

Lucile caught her breath as she read this. Here indeed was revelation. Could it be — There was more. She read on.

"As for the crimson trail I have left behind. That is very simple. I marvel that people can be so blind. I have left it everywhere. It is unusual, very unusual, yet I have left it everywhere, in hundreds of places, in newsboys' papers, in shopgirls' books, in curtains, shades, and even in people's garments, yet not one has read the sign. The sign is this: a bit of crimson thread drawn twice through and tied. There is a purple strand in the thread. It is unusual, yet no one has understood; no one has said 'You are the Spirit of Christmas'."

"The crimson thread," Lucile breathed. "Why, then — then the Mystery Lady and the Spirit of Christmas Lady are one, and I have

seen her many times. I saw her at two hours before midnight. I sold her a book. Twice I saw her talking to Cordie. I followed her upon the street. Had I but known it I might have whispered to her: 'You are the Spirit of Christmas.' Then the gold would have been mine. Two hundred in gold!" she breathed. "Two hundred in gold! And now it is gone!

"But is it? Is it quite gone yet? There is yet this day, the day before Christmas."

Again her eyes sought the printed page. And this is what she read:

"Today I shall not appear before sunset. Early in the evening, and again between the hours of ten and midnight, I shall be somewhere on the Boulevard. I shall attend the Symphony Concert in Opera Hall."

"The concert," Lucile murmured with great joy. "We, too, are going there to-night. We shall be on the Boulevard. There is yet a chance. And the beauty of it all is I shall know her the instant I see her. Oh! You

glorious bag of gold, please, please do wait for me!"

As the car rattled on downtown, her blood cooled and she realized that there was a very slight hope. With these broad hints thrown out to them, all those who had been following the doings of this mysterious lady would be eagerly on the alert. There may have been some, perhaps many, who had found the crimson thread and had marvelled at it. Perhaps, like her, they had seen the Mystery Lady's face and would recognize her if they saw her on the Boulevard. There may have been many who had seen and marvelled at the diamond set iron ring.

"Ah well," Lucile whispered to herself, "there is yet hope. 'Hope springs eternal——'"

At the downtown station she dismissed the subject for matters of more immediate importance, the last great day of sales before Christmas.

Trade until noon was brisk; mostly business men rushing in for "cash and carry." At noon she arranged to have lunch with her old chum,

the elevator girl and, because it was the day before Christmas, instead of the crowded employees' lunch room, they chose as their meeting place the tea room which was patronized for the most part by customers. Here, in a secluded corner, they might talk over old times and relate, with bated breath, the events of the immediate past and the future.

Enough there was to tell, too. Lucile's Mystery Lady, who had turned so suddenly into the one of the Christmas Spirit, her Laurie Seymour, her hoped for $200 in gold, her James, the bundle carrier and last but not least, Cordie. And for Florence there was her mystifying double and the bewitching bag that contained her Christmas surprise. Did ever two girls have more to tell in one short noon hour?

As Florence finished her story; as she spoke of seeing her double talking with the broad shouldered man of the seaman-like bearing, Lucile suddenly leaned foreward to exclaim:

"Florence, that man must have been our bundle carrier, James. He has told Cordie of

his trips upon the sea. There could scarcely be two such men in one store."

"It might be true," smiled Florence, "but don't forget there are two such persons as I am in this store. You never can tell. I'd as soon believe he was the same man. Wouldn't it be thrilling if he should turn out to be a friend of my double's and we should get all mixed up in some sort of affair just because I look exactly like her. Oh, Lucile!" she whispered excitedly, "the day isn't done yet!" And indeed it was not.

"And this man who followed you after you had bought the bag," said Lucile thoughtfully. "He sounds an awful lot like the one who tried to carry Cordie away. Do you suppose——"

"Now you're dreaming," laughed Florence as she reached for her check, then hurried away to her work.

CHAPTER XVII

AN ICY PLUNGE

Florence's opportunity for following her surprising double came sooner than she expected; that very evening, in fact. She had quit work at the regular time, had donned hat and coat, had gone to the checking room to retrieve her Christmas bag. She was just leaving by a side door when, ahead of her in the throng, she caught a glimpse of that splendid cross fox which her double had insisted on her wearing the day before.

"Oh!" she exclaimed. "Here's where I solve a mystery."

Without a thought of what it might lead to, she followed the girl to a surface car and boarded it just behind her. At Grand Avenue the girl got off and Florence followed her again, boarded an eastbound car and, almost

before she knew it, found herself following the girl through a blinding swirl of snow that swept in from the lake.

The street the girl had taken was covered with untrodden snow. It led to the Municipal Pier, the great city pier that like some great black pointing finger of destiny reached a full half mile out into the white ice-bound lake.

"Where — where can she be going?" Florence asked herself.

"Boo! How cold!" she shivered.

The next moment she shivered again, but this time it was from fear. Having chanced to look about, she was startled to see a man all but upon her heels. And that man — no, there could be no mistake about it — that man was the one of the night before, he of the burning black eyes.

Not knowing what else to do, the girl redoubled her speed. A half formed hope was in her mind, a hope that she might catch up with the other girl. Two were better than one, even if both were girls.

Hardly had this hope come when it vanished. In the shadows of the three-story brick structure that formed the base of the pier, her double suddenly disappeared and left her, a lone girl on a wind-swept, deserted street that led to an empty pier. And here was a dark-faced, villainous looking man at her heels.

She could see but one chance now; that she might find her way out upon the pier and there, amid its labyrinth of board walks, freight rooms and deserted lunch rooms, lose herself from her pursuer. She resolved to try it. The next moment she dashed into the shadows of that great black building.

The pier, upon which she had placed hopes of escape, was used in summer as a recreation center. On warm days its board walks and its wind-swept pavilions were thronged. Now it was still as a tomb.

Florence had once been here with the throng, but had taken little notice of things then. The very silence of the place was confusing. She fancied that she heard her own heart beat.

Which way should she turn? Above, two stories up, she remembered was a broad board walk a half mile long. She might race up the stairs to this; but after all it offered no place of hiding. To her right was a hallway which led to a long narrow loading place for trucks. At this place, in summer, ships docked; here their hundreds of tons of fruit, grain, flour, manufactured articles, and a hundred other commodities, were unloaded. She had a vague notion that just back of this loading place, beyond the fast closed doors, was a labyrinth of freight rooms.

"If only one of those doors were open," she breathed. "Perhaps one is unlocked. It's my best chance."

All this thinking consumed less than a moment of time. The next instant she went racing over the cement floor. She was across it and out upon the landing in a moment. This she knew was a perilous position. There was a night watchman about somewhere. Here she was in plain view. What would the watchman do if

he found her? Her pursuer was not far behind.

With a trembling hand, she gripped the latch of a door. It lifted, but the door did not open.

"Locked," she whispered in a tone of despair.

"Try another," was her next thought. She was away like a shot.

Again the latch lifted; again the door refused to budge. She thought she saw a dark figure pass from pillar to pillar in the place she had just left. She could not see him, but she caught the thud-thud of his feet on the cement platform.

Fighting her way against the wind, racing fast, breathing hard, she battled onward. And all the time something within her was whispering: "It's no use, no use, no use." Yet, setting her teeth hard, she raced on.

The man was gaining, she was sure of that. Yes, now as she looked back she saw him, only some fifty yards behind her.

This drove her to frantic effort. But to no avail. He continued to gain; a yard, two yards, five, ten, twenty.

"It's no use," she panted sobbingly.

And then — she could not believe her eyes — before her, to the right, was an open door.

Like a flash she was inside. Grasping the door she attempted to shut it, but the snow blocked it.

One glance about her showed great dark bulks on every hand.

"Freight," she breathed, "piles of freight. Here — here is a chance yet."

The next instant she was tip-toeing her way softly in and out among the innumerable piles of boxes, bags and crates that extended on and on into the impenetrable darkness.

She ran along as softly as she could, yet each time as she paused she fancied that she caught the stealthy footsteps of that horrible man.

"What does he want? Is it the bag that he wants? Whose bag was it? Was it his? If so, why did he let it get away from him?" These questions kept racing through her brain. Then came another question even more disturbing. Perhaps this man had been unfor-

tunate, had been sick or had lost all his property. It might be that he had returned just in time to miss the opportunity of redeeming this lost possession which contained something he prized, perhaps of great value.

"In that case he is more to be pitied than feared," she thought.

For an instant she contemplated going back to him; yet she dared not.

So, in the end, she coninued tip-toeing about. Round a great pile of sacks, filled with sugar or beans, past boxes of tin cans and in and out among massive pieces of machinery, she wandered, all the time wondering in a vague sort of way what was to be the end of it all.

The end to her stay in the store-room came with lightning-like rapidity. She had just tip-toed around a huge steel drum of some sort when all of a sudden there burst upon her ear a deafening roar that shattered the stillness of the place.

The next instant a great black dog leaped at her.

He was not three feet from her when, with an agility that surprised her, she leaped from box top to box top until she found herself ten feet above the floor.

But the dog, who appeared to be an utterly savage beast, could climb too. She could hear him scrambling and scratching his way up, growling as he came. Her head was in a whirl. What was to be done? Suddenly she realized that just before her, beyond the boxes, was a window. Dragging her bag after her, she succeeded in reaching the window. She found it locked. In her desperation she dropped her bag and began kicking at the sash. With a sudden snap the fastenings gave way. She was caught so unawares that she plunged straight out of the window.

With a bump that knocked all the wind from her lungs and most of her senses from her head, she landed on something hard. Without being able to help herself, she rolled over once, then fell again. This time, to her surprise and consternation, she did not bump; she splashed.

She sank. She rose. With all her nerves alert, she swam strongly in the stinging lake water. She had fallen from the narrow pier ledge and had landed in the lake.

A white cake of ice loomed up before her. She swam to it and climbed upon it. What was to be done? The thermometer was near zero. She was soaked to the skin, and far from anyone she knew.

"Got — got to get to shore somehow," she shivered. "I'll freeze here, sure. Freeze in no time."

She looked back at the place from which she had come. The window was still open. The dog had stopped barking. She wondered in a vague sort of way what had become of her pursuer.

"And — and my bag," she chattered. "It — it's in there." She was coming almost to hate that bag.

"Can't get up there anyway," was her final comment. It was true; between the water line and the surface of the pier landing was a sheer

wall of cement, eight feet high and smooth as glass.

Her gaze swept a broad circle. Off to her right was a solid mass of ice which appeared to reach to shore.

"One swim and then I can walk to land," she shuddered.

Two steps forward, a sudden plunge, and again she was in the freezing water.

Once on the ice she dashed away at top speed. It was a race, a race for her life. Already her clothing was freezing stiff.

Here she leaped a chasm of black water; there she tripped over a hole and fell flat; here dodged a stretch of honeycomb ice and raced across a broad level stretch.

Almost before she knew it she was alongside a row of steamships tied up in a channel close to shore. Then, to her surprise, she caught the gleam of a light in a cabin on the upper deck of the smallest boat tied there.

"There's a rope cable hanging over the side," she told herself. "I — I could climb it. There

must be someone up there, and — and a fire. A fire! Oh, a fire and warmth! I must do it, or I'll freeze.

"Of course they are strangers — a man, two men, maybe a family, but sea folks are kind people, I'm told. They know what it means to be wet and cold. I — I'll risk it."

The next moment, hand over hand, she was making her way up the cable.

Once on deck, she raced along the side until she came to a stair. Up this she sprang, then down the side again until she was at the door of the room where the light still gleamed into the night.

Without a moment's hesitation she banged on the door.

"Who —who's there?" came in a distinctly feminine voice. Florence's heart gave a great throb of joy.

"It's me. Only me," she answered. "You don't know me, but let me in. I fell in the lake. I — I'm free — freezing!"

At once the door flew open and she was

dragged inside. Then the door slammed shut.

For a fraction of a moment the two girls stood staring at one another, then as in one voice, they burst out:

"It's you!"

"It's you!"

The girl in the ship's cabin was none other than Florence's double.

There was no time for explaining. The girl began tugging away at her double's frozen garments. Ten minutes later, with her clothing on a line behind the glowing stove, Florence sat wrapped in a blanket by the fire, sipping a cup of cocoa.

For a time she sat looking at the girl who was so marvelously like herself in appearance. Then she said quietly:

"Would you mind telling me about yourself?"

"Not a bit. Guess I ought to. You did me a good turn. My name's Meg."

"I guessed that much."

"How?"

"That's what the man and the woman called me."

"The man and the woman?" For a moment the girl's face was puzzled. Then, "Oh yes, I——"

She paused for a moment as if about to tell something about the strange man and woman who had told Florence that the train left at eleven-thirty. If this had been her intention she thought better of it, for presently she said:

"My mother and father are dead. Since I was ten years old I've lived with my uncle, mostly on ships."

"How — how thrilling!"

"Well, maybe, but you don't learn much on ships. There's an old saying: 'You can't go to school if you live on a canal boat.' Ships are about as bad. I've got through eighth grade, though, and I want to go some more. That day I took your place and you wore my clothes I——"

"Who — who's that?" Florence had heard the movement of feet outside.

"No friend of mine; not this time of night. Must be yours."

"It might be the man!"

"What man? Your friend?"

"No. Not my friend; an awful man who wanted the bag."

"What bag?"

"A bag I bought at an auction. My — my Christmas surprise. There — there he is," she whispered tensely as there came a knock at the door.

"Come in," said Meg.

"Oh, don't!" Florence struggled to her feet. "Don't let him in!"

"Why not?" Meg had risen. In her hand was an affair resembling a policeman's club, only it was made of iron — a heavy belaying pin. "Why not?" she repeated. "If I don't fancy him, he'll let himself out fast enough." At the same time there came a rattle at the door knob. Florence sank back into her chair.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE MYSTERY LADY'S NEW ROLE

Such a party as it was; that one which was being enjoyed by Lucile and her friends of the juvenile book corner. Such crisp brown cream biscuits! Such breast of turkey with cranberry sauce and dressing! Such pudding! Even in the days of her childhood at home Lucile had never seen a more sumptuous feast. All this, in the midst of the gayest of Christmas spirit, made the occasion one long to be remembered by any person whose mind was not too much occupied by bewitching thoughts of other important things.

As for Lucile, her mind was indeed engaged with dreams that were far from the realm of food and drink. She was thinking of that meeting she had so long dreamed of and which she still had the courage to hope might come to

pass, her own meeting with the Mystery Lady of the Christmas Spirit.

"I shan't fail to recognize her," she assured herself, "though she be dressed like an Eskimo or a South Sea Island maiden."

At last the time came for strolling down the Boulevard toward the music hall. Lucile stared at the passing throngs until Laurie teasingly asked her whether she hoped to see in one of them the face of a long lost brother.

At last she found herself in the opera chair of the great hall. Now, at least, she was in the same room as the Mystery Lady, or soon must be, for if the Mystery Lady had not entered she soon would. In ten minutes the first note would be struck. There was a thrill in that.

It was to be a truly wonderful program, such a one as the girl had perhaps never listened to before. And she loved music, fairly adored it. As she thought how her interest this night must be divided between the fine music and the Mystery Lady, she found herself almost wishing that the Mystery Lady had not brought

into her life so much that was unusual, perplexing and mysterious.

"Perhaps I shall be able to locate her before the music begins," she thought to herself. "Then, during a recess, I'll glide up to her and whisper, 'You are the Spirit of Christmas.'"

Though she scanned the sea of faces near and far, not one of them all, save those of her own little group, was familiar to her.

It was with a little sigh of resignation that she at last settled back in her seat and allowed her program to flutter to her lap.

The time for the first number had arrived. The musicians had taken their places. The rows of violinists and cornetists, the standing bass viol player, the conductor with his baton, all were there. Like soldiers at attention, they waited for the soloist.

Mademoiselle Patricia Diurno, the country's most talented young pianist, was to lead that night in the rendition of three master concertos.

There was an expectant lull, then mighty ap-

plause. She was coming. At a door to the right she appeared. Down a narrow way between rows of musicians she passed, a tall, slim, gracefully beautiful lady.

In the center of the stage she paused to bow in recognition of the applause, then again, and yet again. Then, turning with such grace as only a trained musician knows, she moved to here place and with a slight nod to the leader, placed her hands upon the keys, then sent them racing over the keys, bringing forth such glorious music as only might be learned beside a rushing brook in the depths of the forest.

Lucile gripped her seat until her fingers ached. She strove to remain seated while her face went white and then was flushed with color.

"It is she," she whispered to herself. "It cannot be, yet it is! The same eyes, the same nose, the same hair. I cannot be mistaken. It is she! Patricia Diurno, the celebrated, the most wonderful virtuoso, is the Mystery Lady

and the Spirit of Christmas! And I? How am I to remain in this seat for two mortal hours while before me sits a woman pouring forth bewitching music, a woman who for a handclasp has the power to make me rich, yes, rich? Two hundred in gold. How — how can I?"

CHAPTER XIX

MEG WIELDS A BELAYING PIN

Florence started back at sight of the one who opened the door in response to Meg's "Come in." It was indeed the small man of the burning, hawk-like eyes. His disposition appeared to have been changed by his battle with the storm. It was plain from the first that he was now a man not to be trifled with; at least not by two girls in a lonely ship's cabin at an hour fast approaching midnight. He twisted his face into an ugly grin. His smile was more horrible than a snarl would have been. His white teeth showed like an angry dog's.

"The bag!" he said in a tone that was a command. It was evident that he was both angry and desperate.

"What bag?" said Meg, rising as her com-

panion, wrapping her blanket closer about her, slunk further into the corner.

"My bag!" His tone was threatening. He advanced a step.

Florence could see a deep red stealing up beneath the natural tan of the daughter of the sea as she too advanced a step. Meg showed not the slightest fear.

"There's no bag here." Her hand was behind her, gripping the belaying pin. "No bag at all unless you call that thing a bag." She pointed to a canvas duffel bag that hung in the corner. "That's mine. You can't have it. You can't have anything in this cabin. You can't even touch anything or anybody, so you better get out."

"So!" The man's word was more like a hiss than a real expression of the word. At the same time his teeth were so uncovered that one might count them.

"So!" He advanced another step.

There came a faint click. Something bright gleamed in his right hand. A scream came to

Florence's lips, but she did not utter it; she only sat and stared.

"Yes," said Meg in an even tone, while the red mounted to the roots of her hair. "We get your kind on the ships too. We get all kinds."

Then, like a tiger in the jungle, she leaped forward. There followed a resounding thwack; a heavy knife went jangling to the floor. The stranger's usually dark face turned a sickly white as, gripping a bruised wrist, he backed out of the room.

Stepping to the door Meg closed it, but did not bother to lock it.

Stooping, she picked up the knife and examined it carefully.

"That," she said in a matter of fact tone, "is a good knife, much better than the one I use for slicing bacon. I shall keep it.

"See," she said, holding it close to Florence, "it has a six-inch blade that locks when you open it. That's what made it click."

Florence shrank from the thing.

"He had no right to carry it," said Meg, closing it and dropping it into a chest. "It's a concealed weapon, and they're against the law. So I'll keep it. Now what about this bag?" she asked suddenly.

"Why, you see," smiled Florence, "to-morrow's Christmas. Since I didn't expect a surprise from anyone, I decided to buy myself one. So I went down to an auction sale and bought a bag with 'contents if any.' I meant to buy a bag anyway, and the 'contents if any' was to be my surprise."

"What did you get?" Meg asked, leaning forward eagerly.

"I didn't look. I meant to keep the bag until to-morrow. It wouldn't be a Christmas surprise if I opened it before hand. And now it's gone!"

"What — what did you expect to find?"

"It might have been anything — silk scarfs, some splendid furs, jewelry, a watch — anything. And then again," her voice lost its enthusiasm, "it might have contained a man's

collar and a suit of pajamas. I couldn't tell. Maybe it was just nothing at all. It was awful light."

"All those things," said Meg, her eyes shining, "or any of them. What a pity! What fun you would have had!"

For a moment she sat there in silence. Then suddenly, "Where's it gone?"

"I — I lost it on the pier."

"Where?" Meg sat up all alert.

Florence told her as best she could.

"I'll go get it." Meg dragged her coat from its hanger.

"No! No! Don't!" Florence exclaimed, springing up. "It's dangerous."

"What's to be afraid of?" laughed Meg. "Don't everybody on the pier know me? Even the watch-dog knows me? As for your late friend and follower, I'll just take my belaying pin along. But I guess he's far enough away by now. Watch me. I'll be back in half an hour with that bag — you wait and see."

With a rush that let in a great gust of cold

air and snow, she was out of the cabin and away.

The greater part of what she had said to Florence was true. She did know the dock as well as any ship on which she had ever sailed. She knew the watchman and his dog. But, without her knowledge, there was one person in authority by the pier that night who did not know her and this the two girls were to learn to their sorrow.

* * * * * * * *

Seeing a heavy dressing gown hanging in the corner, Florence rose and, discarding her blanket, put this robe on. Then, after feeling of her slowly drying clothes and moving her skirt closer to the stove, she walked to the door and locked it.

"Meg may not be afraid of that man," she whispered to herself, "but I am."

At once, as she began walking the floor of the narrow cabin, her mind went to work on the many unanswered questions stored away in her mind. Like some scientist examining speci-

mens, she drew these questions one at a time from their mental pigeon holes.

Why did this evil looking man with the scar above his eye want her bag so badly? Suddenly it occurred to her that he might be a thief, or a safe blower, and this bag might contain some of his valuable loot. She remembered reading of criminals who had locked their booty in trunks or bags and stored them in some public place until the police had gotten off their trail.

"In that case," she told herself, "my surprise will be a disappointment. No matter how wonderful the contents may be, I will not keep the least bit of it, but turn it over to the police.

"But then," she thought again, "probably Meg will not be able to get the bag. She may not be able to get in. Probably the watchman heard the dog and closed the door and window. And again, she may find it and that terrible man may take it from her."

This last she doubted. Meg appeared abundantly able to take care of herself. Florence could not but admire her strength and bravery.

It had been magnificent, the way she had put that villainous intruder to flight. She thought of what the girl had said about being reared on a steamship and wanting more education. She found herself longing to help her. And why not? She roomed alone. Hers was a large bed, large enough for two, and she thought she could get a scholarship for her in the academy connected with the university. Anyway, it could be managed somehow. There were elevators in great hotels close to the school that must be run. Perhaps she could find her a part time position on one of these. She would talk to her about it as soon as opportunity offered.

But who was she, after all? She had been telling her story when that man broke in upon them. Would she have told why she asked Florence to wear her clothes for a half day and play the role of Meg? If she had, what would her reason have been?

During the time that these problems had passed in review in her memory she had been walking the cabin floor. Now she came to a

sudden pause. Had she heard footsteps on the deck below? She thought so. Yes, there it was again, more plainly now. They were mounting the stairs. Who could it be? Was it that man? She shuddered. Springing to the corner, she put out a hand for Meg's belaying pin. It was gone. The door was locked, but the lock looked very weak. What was she to do? It did not seem possible that Meg could be back so soon. She had——

A hand tried the door. What should she do? Should she let the person in?

Certainly she should, for in Meg's unmistakable voice she heard:

"Let me in."

When Florence threw open the door she saw at a glance that Meg had the bag and that the seal was unbroken.

"Tell you what," began Florence, "you go home with me to-night. To-morrow is Christmas. We don't have to get up early. We'll have something hot to drink and some cakes, and we'll talk a little. Then, just as the clock

strikes twelve, we'll break the seal to the bag. Won't that be romantic?"

"I should say!" said Meg with gleaming eyes. "That would be spiffy! When do we start?"

"At once," said Florence, pulling her clothing from the line.

They were not destined to get away so easily, however. Unfortunately for them, there was a person near the entrance to the pier than night whom Meg did not know, had in fact never seen.

The wharf to which the boats were tied lay a distance of about a block south of the entrance to the pier, and the particular boat on which Meg had taken up quarters was tied about two blocks from the end of the pier. In order to reach the car line they were obliged to battle their way against the storm, which had increased in violence, until they were near the entrance to the pier.

They had covered these three blocks and had paused to catch their breath and to watch for

the light of a street car boring its way through the whirl of snow, when a gruff voice said:

"Where y' think y'r goin'?"

"Why, we—" Florence hesitated.

"What you got in that bag?"

Florence turned to find herself looking into the face of a young policeman.

She flashed a glance at Meg. That one glance convinced her that Meg did not know him.

"Where — where's Tim?" Meg faltered.

"Tim who?"

"Tim McCarty. This is his beat."

"'T'aint now. It's mine. He's been transferred. What's more," he paused to lay a gloved hand on the travelling bag, "since this is my beat, part of my job's findin' out what comes off them ships at night. What y' got in that bag?"

"I — I don't know," Florence said the words impulsively, and regretted them the instant they were said.

"Don't know —" he ceased speaking to stare

at her. "Say, sister, you're good! Don't know what you've got in that bag! In that case all I can do is take you to the station for questioning.

"No," he said in a kindlier tone after a moment's thought, "maybe if you'll unlock it and let me see what's inside I'll let you go."

Open it and let him see what was inside? Florence's head was in a whirl. Open it? What if her fears proved true? What if it contained stolen goods? Why, then she would see the first light of Christmas morning behind prison bars. Was ever anyone in such a mess? Did ever a girl pay so dearly for her own Christmas surprise?

But Meg was speaking: "Say, you see here," she said to the young policeman, her voice a low drawl. Florence heard them indistinctly against the roar of the storm. So there she stood with her back to the wind, clinging tightly to the handle of her bag and hoping against hope that she would not be obliged to reveal her secret there and then.

CHAPTER XX

THE GREAT MOMENT

The revelation that had come to Lucile as she sat there listening to the first notes of a great concerto, led by a famous virtuoso, was so unusual, so altogether startling, that she felt tempted to doubt her senses.

"Surely," she whispered to herself, "I must be mistaken. There is a resemblance, but she is not that woman. Imagine a great virtuoso, one of the famous musicians of our land, being in a department store at two hours before midnight! Fancy her going up and down streets, in and out of the stores and shops dressed in all manner of absurd costumes, playing the star role in a newspaper stunt to increase circulation! How impossible! How — how utterly absurd!"

She paused for reflection and as she paused, as if to join her in quiet thought, the great

musician allowed her flying fingers to come to rest on the keyboard while a violin soloist did his part.

Then, quick as light, but not too swiftly for Lucile's keen eyes, she slipped something from her finger, a something that sent off a brilliant flash of light. This she placed on the piano beside the keyboard.

To Lucile, resting as it did against the black of the ebony piano, this thing stood out like a circle of stars against the deep blackness of night. She felt her lips forming the words:

"Don't put it there! A hundred people will see it!"

That dull gray circle with the flashing spot of light was a ring; Cordie's iron ring with its diamond setting. There was no longer a single vestige of doubt in the girl's mind regarding the identity of the Mystery Lady and the Spirit of Christmas. They were one and the same, and together they were Patricia Diurno, the celebrated virtuoso.

Somehow Lucile got through that two hours

without screaming or jumping from her seat to hurl herself upon the platform, but she will never quite know just how she did it. At times she drove the whole affair from her mind to think of other unsolved problems — of Laurie and the lost author; of Cordie, and of Sam. At other times she found herself completely absorbed by the wonderful music which poured forth.

The majesty of the music grew as the evening passed. When at last the orchestra struck out into that masterpiece, Tschaikowsky's Concerto in B minor, she forgot all else to lose herself in the marvelous rise and fall of cadent sound that resembled nothing so much as a storm on a rockbound coast.

The piano, leading on, called now to the violin to join in, then upon the cello, the bass viols, the cornets, the saxophones, the trombones, the trap-drums, until all together, in perfect unison, they sent forth such a volume of sound as shook the very walls.

The great virtuoso, forgetful of all else, gave

herself completely to her music. Turning first this way, then that, she beckoned the lagging orchestra on until a climax had been reached.

Then, after a second of such silence as is seldom experienced save after a mighty clap of thunder, as if from somewhere away in a distant forest there came the tinkle, tinkle of the single instrument as her velvet tipped fingers glided across the keys.

A single violin joined in, then another and another, then all of them, until again the great chorus swelled to the very dome of the vast auditorium.

This was the music that, like the songs of mermaids of old, charm men into forgetfulness; that lifts them and carries them away from all dull care, all sordid affairs of money and all temptation to the mean, the low and the base.

It so charmed Lucile that for a full moment after the last note had been struck and the last echo of applause had died away, she sat there listening to the reverberations of the matchless music that still sounded in her soul.

When she awoke from her revery it was with a mighty start.

"Where is she?" she exclaimed, leaping from her seat.

"Who?" said Laurie.

"Patricia Diurno! The Mystery Lady! Spirit of Christmas! Where has she gone?"

Staring to right and left, she found her way blocked. Then with the nimbleness of an obstacle racer, she vaulted over four rows of seats to dash away through the milling crowd toward the platform.

"Where is she?" she demanded of an attendant.

"Who, Miss?"

"The — the Mystery Lady. No, No! Miss Diurno, the virtuoso."

"Most likely in the Green Room, Miss. Who — who — is some of her folks dead?"

"No, no! But please show me where the Green Room is, quick!"

Leading the way, he took her to the back of the stage, through a low door, down a long

passage-way to a large room where a number of people stood talking.

A glance about the place told her that Miss Diurno was not there.

"Is this the Green Room?"

"Yes, Miss."

"Then where is she?"

"I don't know, Miss. You might ask him."

He nodded to a large man in an evening suit.

"Where — where is Miss Diurno?" she asked timidly.

"Miss Diurno did not stay. She left at once."

"Gone!" Lucile murmured. "And my opportunity gone with it." Sinking weakly into a chair, she buried her face in her hands.

This lasted but a moment; then she was up and away like the wind. Miss Diurno, the Mystery Woman, Spirit of Christmas, had gone out on the Boulevard. She had promised, through the news columns, to be about the Boulevard until midnight. There was still a chance.

Hurrying back to the now almost deserted

hall, she found Laurie and Cordie waiting for her.

"Well now, what does this mean?" Laurie laughingly demanded. "Did you recognize in the hands of some violinist the Stradivarius that was stolen from your grandfather fifty years ago?"

"Not quite that," Lucile smiled back. "I did discover that someone has vanished, someone I must find. Yes, yes, I surely must!" She clenched her hands tight in her tense excitement. "I want you two to promise to walk the Boulevard with me until midnight, that is, if I don't find her sooner. Will you? Promise me!"

"'Oh promise me,'" Laurie hummed. "Some contract! What say, Cordie? Are you in on it?"

"It sounds awfully interesting and mysterious. Let's do."

"All right, we're with you till the clock strikes for Christmas morning."

Lucile led the way out of the hall. They

were soon out in the cool, crisp air of night. There had been a storm but now the storm had passed. The night was bright with stars.

To promenade the Boulevard at this hour on such a night was not an unpleasant task. Out from a midnight blue sky the golden moon shone across a broad expanse of snow which covered the park, while to the left of them, as if extending their arms to welcome jolly old St. Nicholas, the great buildings loomed toward the starry heavens.

The street was gay with light and laughter, for was not this the night of all nights, the night before Christmas?

CHAPTER XXI

THE MAN IN GRAY

"I know of an odd old custom which might prove interesting," said Laurie as the three of them walked arm in arm along the boulevard. "I've forgotten to what little out of the way corner of the world it belongs, but anyway, in the villages of that land, sometime near to midnight, on Christmas Eve, friends gather about small tables in their taverns and over the festive board talk of the year that is gone. The strange part is this: Just to make it a clearing up time of unsolved problems, each member of the group may select one other member of that group and may ask him three questions. Each member is pledged to answer all three questions frankly and truthfully.

"Oh!" exclaimed Cordie. "I'd not like to get caught in a crowd like that."

"Too bad," sighed Laurie. "I was about to propose that a half hour before midnight we get together to celebrate in just that way. I think I can pick up a person or two whose secrets would be of interest to some people I know."

"That would be wonderful," exclaimed Lucile. "But must we select one person, only one?"

"One, that's all."

"And ask him just three questions; no more?"

"Not another one."

"Eenie-meenie-minie-mo," exclaimed Lucile, pointing her finger first at Cordie, then at Laurie,

> "Catch a monkey by the toe,
> If he hollers, let him go,
> Eenie-meenie-minie-mo.

Laurie, you're my choice," she laughed. "I'll ask three questions of you, though goodness knows I'd like to ask them of Cordie."

"Wait," said Laurie holding up a warning

finger. "There may be someone there who is more interesting to you than we are."

"There's only one such person in the world," exclaimed Lucile, "and — and I hope I may meet her before that hour comes."

She was a little surprised at the glances Laurie and Cordie exchanged and greatly puzzled by the fact that they did not ask her who that person was.

Laurie and Cordie gave themselves over to the gaiety of the night. The blazing light, the splendid cars that went gliding down the Boulevard, the magnificent furs worn by those who chose to promenade the broad sidewalk, were sights to catch any eye.

They did not hold Lucile's attention. She had eyes for but one sight, the glimpse of a single face. What that glimpse would mean to her! Room rent paid, term bills paid, a warm coat, other needed clothing, a last minute present which she had been too poor to purchase, and a snug little sum in the bank. All these it would mean, and more; two hundred in gold.

But the face did not appear. For an hour they walked the Boulevard, yet no sight of the Mystery Lady, she of the Christmas Spirit, came to them. One matter troubled Lucile more and more. Often in her search she looked behind her. More than once, four times in fact, she had caught sight of a man who walked always at exactly the same distance behind them. A tall man, it was, with a long gray coat, a high collar turned up and cap pulled low.

"It isn't just because he happens to be walking in our direction," she told herself with a little shiver. "Twice we have turned and walked back and once we crossed the street. But all the time he has been directly behind us. I wonder what it could mean?"

At that moment there came the clatter of hoofs and four mounted policemen, clad in bright uniform, came riding down the Boulevard.

"It's a big night," exclaimed Laurie. "There's a special squad of them out."

"Oh there — there he is!" exclaimed Cordie.

"There's Dick! That's Patrick O'Hara riding him! Aren't they splendid? And right beside him is Tim, good old Tim. See! They recognized me. They touched their hats!"

"Who's Tim?" asked Lucile.

"Don't you wish you knew?" taunted Cordie. "If only you were going to ask your questions of me you'd be sure to find out."

"Don't worry," smiled Laurie. "I've just decided that you shall be the person to answer my three questions."

"You horrid thing! I shan't go! I'm off your old party!" In mock anger, she sprang away from her companions and went racing on ahead of them.

Then strange and startling things began to happen. A long, low-built blue roadster, which had been creeping along the curb as if looking for someone, came to a grinding stop. A man leaped out. A second later a piercing scream reached the ears of Laurie and Lucile.

"It's Cordie!" exclaimed Lucile. "Some — something terrible! C'mon!"

As she said this a gray streak shot past her. Even in this wild moment of excitement, she recognized the man who had been dogging their footsteps and she wondered why she had not recognized him sooner.

The next second they were in the midst of things. With wildly beating heart Lucile stared at the panorama that was enacted before her. Powerless to aid, she saw Cordie, the innocent country girl, the center of a battle, snatched from hand to hand until it seemed the very life must be torn from her.

First she caught a glimpse of her fighting frantically but vainly in the grasp of a man. Lucile recognized him instantly.

"The hawk-eyed man!" she whispered. "The one who claimed to be her brother! Quick!" she exclaimed, gripping Laurie's arm until her fingers cut into the very flesh. "Quick! They're taking her to the auto. They'll carry her away!"

Active as he was, Laurie was not the first to leap at the hawk-eyed one. A man in gray,

the man who had been following them, sprang squarely at the captor's throat.

With a howl of rage and fear the villain loosed one hand to strike out at his mysterious assailant. All in vain; the rescuer came straight on. Striking the captor squarely in the middle, he bowled him over like a ten-pin. So sudden was this attack that Cordie was also thrown to the pavement.

Finding herself free and unharmed, she sprang to her feet. She felt a hand at her elbow and turned to look into the face of Laurie Seymour.

"Ah!" she breathed, "I am safe!"

But even as she said this she saw Laurie collapse like an empty sack, and the next instant grasped from behind by two clutching hands, she was again whirled toward the kidnapper's car.

Half blinded by terror, she caught a vision of police blue that hovered above her.

"Pat! Patrick O'Hara!" she called.

There came the angry crack of an automatic.

Then the figure in blue came hurtling off the horse to fall at her feet. At the same instant there was a second catapult-like blow of the man in gray. Again she was snatched free.

"Jiggers! Beat it! Beat it!" she heard in a hoarse whisper. The next instant the door to the blue car slammed shut and its wheels began to move.

For three seconds she wavered there, watching the car move away. Then catching a glimpse of Patrick O'Hara lying at her feet, wounded, perhaps dead, a great courage came to her.

"They must not escape!" she screamed. "They shall not!"

The next instant she leaped into the saddle of the police horse, Dick. Just as the noble animal dashed away she felt the solid impact of someone mounting behind her.

One glance she cast behind her. "Oh!" she breathed. It was the man in gray. To Dick she whispered: "All right, Dick, old dear, Go! Go fast! For the love of Patrick O'Hara and Laurie Seymour; for the love of all that's good

and true, go; go as you never went before!"

There was no need to talk to Dick. He was away like the wind.

It was a moment of high suspense and swift action; one of those moments when success or failure hinges on the right move at the right second.

CHAPTER XXII

THE FINISH

Dick was no ordinary horse. He was an unusual horse who had very unusual masters. The young policeman had spoken the truth when he said that Pat O'Hara's horse was the smartest on the force. As Dick felt his young mistress in the saddle and the man in gray behind her, he realized that this was not to be a race, but a fight. He seemed to sense that his task was to keep in sight of that racing blue automobile, and not for one instant to lose sight of it.

Follow it he did, and that at the peril of his own life and the lives of those who rode. Now dashing past a low, closed car, now crowding between two black sedans, now all but run down by a great yellow car, he forged straight ahead.

He not only followed; he actually gained. Leaning far forward in the saddle, Cordie kept her eyes upon the fleeing car. Now they were but three quarters of a block away, now a half, now a quarter.

It was an exciting moment. Beads of perspiration stood out upon the tip of Cordie's nose. The hand that held the reins trembled. They were gaining, gaining, gaining. Through narrow passages impossible to a car, old Dick crowded forward like a fleet, sure-footed dog. Now a yard he gained, now a rod, and now a long stretch of open. They were gaining, gaining, gaining! What were they to do once the car was overtaken? That Cordie could not tell. She only knew one thing clearly — the men in the car must not escape and she was determined to prevent their escape.

Then, as they neared a cross street, a man stepped out on the running board and flashed an automatic. Aiming deliberately, he fired. The next instant, with the din of a hundred sets of brakes screaming in their ears, Cordie,

the horse and the man in gray were piled all in a heap in the middle of the street.

In the midst of all this there came a crash. What was that? Dared she hope it was the villains' car? At sound of it the man in gray was up and away like mad.

"What's this?" she heard an unfamiliar voice saying. A man from the nearest car behind them had come to the aid of the girl and the horse.

* * * * * * * *

In the meantime, Lucile was passing through experiences quite as strange.

Laurie Seymour had been knocked unconscious by a blow on the head. Patrick O'Hara had been shot from his horse. How serious were the injuries of these, her friends?

To determine this, then to see what might be done for their relief; this appeared to be her duty, even though Cordie was in grave danger still.

Men pressed forward to assist her. They carried the unconscious ones into the lobby of

a hotel. There they were stretched out upon davenports and remedies applied by the house physician.

Lucile was engaged in stopping the flow of blood from Patrick O'Hara's scalp wound. She chanced to look up and there, at the edge of the davenpoprt, she caught sight of a familiar face.

"Miss Diurno! The Mystery Lady! Spirit of Christmas! Two Hundred in gold!" her mind registered automatically, but her fingers held rigidly to their task.

* * * * * * * *

As Cordie struggled to her feet, after being plunged from the back of the fallen horse, she saw the man in gray leap for the side of an automobile that had crashed into the curb. A thrill ran through her as she realized that this was the blue racer. The next instant, after fairly tearing the door from the hinges, the man in gray dragged a man out of the blue car, threw him to the pavement and held him rigidly there.

There came the clatter of horse's hoofs, and then down sprang good old Tim, the police sergeant, and his fellow officer.

"He's a bad one," growled the one in gray. "If you've got handcuffs, put 'em on him."

Tim hesitated. How was an officer to know who was in the right? This might be but a Christmas Eve fight. He had not witnessed the beginning of this affair.

A hand tugged at his sleeve. "If you please, Tim," came a girlish voice, "It's me, the one who stole Patrick O'Hara's horse. If you'll believe me you better take his word for it. He's right."

"Oh, he is, eh?" rumbled Tim. "Little girl, what you say goes. I'd trust you any time. On they go."

The hawk-eyed man, for it was he that had been captured (his accomplice had vanished) made one more desperate effort to escape, but failed. The handcuffs were snapped on and he was led away by the younger officer.

"Now," said Tim in a sterner voice, "tell

me how Pat O'Hara's horse comes to be lyin' there in the street?"

"He — he shot him," Cordie gulped, pointing away toward the hawk-eyed man.

"He did, did he? Then he should be hung."

"Pat — Patrick O'Hara's sho — shot too," Cordie was very near to tears. "If it hadn't been for him," she nodded to the figure in gray, "we — we wouldn't have got him, though Dick and I would have done our — our best, for he — he shot our good good friend Pat O'Hara." At this, Cordie's long pent up tears came flooding forth as she hid her face on good old Tim's broad breast.

"That's all right," he soothed, patting her on the shoulders. "It's not as bad as you think. Look! There's old Dick getting to his feet now."

It was true. The man in gray had walked over to where Dick lay, had coaxed the horse to get up, and was now leading him limping to the curb.

"It's only a flesh wound in the leg," he ex-

plained. "Give him a week or ten days and he'll be on the beat again. Dick, old boy," he said huskily, "and you too, dear little Cordie, I want to thank you for what you've done for me. I — I've had my revenge, if a man has a right to revenge. And it might be they'll find the fox skins among his plunder."

The eyes of the man in gray, just now brimming with honest tears, were turned toward Cordie. It was James, the seaman and bundle carrier!

For a moment he gripped the girl's hand, then turning to Tim, said:

"You'll look after her? See that she gets safely back to her friends?"

"Oh sure! Sure!"

"Then I'll be getting over to the police station. They'll be wanting someone to prefer charges."

He was turning to go, but Cordie called him back. Handing him a slip of paper on which she had scribbled a number and an address, she said:

"Call me on the phone at that number to-

morrow, or else at the Butler House before midnight. I want to know whether you get those wonderful silver fox skins back. I — might have a customer for them if you do."

"It would make a great little old Christmas for me if I did," he smiled. "But it's going to be all right anyway."

Reading the address Cordie had given him, James gave a great start. "Right on the Gold Coast!" was his mental comment. "Out where there is nothing but palaces and mansions!"

CHAPTER XXIII

MEG'S SECRET

And what of Florence and Meg? They had not fared so badly after all. Three minutes after her first meeting with the young policeman, Florence was thinking fine things about Meg.

"This girl Meg certainly has a way about her," she thought. "She does things to people."

She wondered what Meg had done to the young policeman. "Surely," she told herself, "she didn't use that iron belaying pin on him the way she did on that terrible man who had been following me. No, she didn't do that, though I suspect she still has it hidden up her sleeve."

One thing was sure, she had done something to the young policeman. Florence hadn't heard what Meg had said, but she did know that one

moment he was frightening the very life out of her by demanding that she unlock the bag and show him the contents, which was quite as much unknown to her as to him, and the next he had let out a low chuckling laugh and had told her she might run along. How was she to account for that?

She didn't bother much to account for it. She was too much pleased at being able to go on her way, and carrying with her the bag with its secret securely sealed. She would know about Meg later. Meg had promised to tell.

It was only after they had started on that she noticed that the storm had blown itself out and the stars were shining. They were soon aboard a car bound for home.

An hour later, in the warmth of her room, and with the bag at their feet, Florence and Meg sat dreamily thinking their own thoughts.

Florence was not sure that she did not sleep a little. After the wild experiences of the night, followed by the battle with the storm, this would not be surprising.

She did not sleep long, however, and soon they fell to talking in the way girls will when the hour is approaching midnight and the strenuous experiences of an exciting night are all at an end.

At an end, did I say? Well, not quite. Perhaps you might say not at all; for did not the mysterious brown leather traveling bag, which had been wondered about and fought over, rest on the floor at their feet? And was not the seal unbroken? Did it not still contain Florence's Christmas secret? And now it was just twenty-five minutes until midnight, the witching hour when secrets are revealed.

"There is just time for you to finish telling me about yourself before the tower clock strikes midnight," said Florence, glancing at the small clock on her desk.

"Oh!" laughed Meg with a little shrug of her wonderful shoulders. "There really isn't much to tell. I've already told you that since I was a slip of a child I've lived on ships with my uncle. He's a mate. We've been on a lot

of ships because he often drinks too much and can't hold his position. He's a big gruff man, but kind enough in his way."

"That man who ——"

"No, the man who told you about the train was not my uncle. That was Tim, a sailor. My uncle sent him.

"Well, you know," she went on, "at first I was just sort of a ship's mascot and the sailors' plaything. They rode me on their backs and carried me, screaming with delight, to the top of the mast.

"That didn't last long. They found I could peel potatoes, so they put me to work. And I've been at work ever since."

She spread out her hands and Florence saw that they were as seamed and hard as a farmer's wife's.

"I don't mind work," Meg continued. "I love it. But I like to learn things, too; like to learn them out of books, with folks to tell me what it means. I've gone to school all I could, but it wasn't much. I want to go some more.

"Uncle has signed up for a sea voyage through the Canal to England. He wanted me to go along as cook. It's a lumber ship; sure to be a rough crew. I don't mind 'em much."

Something suddenly clattered on the floor. It was Meg's belaying pin.

"I — I guess you sort of get rough when you go on the sea," she apologized, smiling. "That's partly why I didn't want to go. My uncle would have made me go that day you changed places with me, if he'd found me. He likes to have me along because he can get a better berth himself if he can bring along a good cook. Good sea cooks are scarce.

"I'm not going now. His train's gone and he's gone. He left that day."

"So that was what the man and the woman meant by the train leaving at eleven-thirty?" asked Florence.

"Yes. That woman was the matron of the Seamen's Home. She thought I ought to go. She didn't know everything. She didn't understand. I'm eighteen. My uncle hasn't any

right to claim me now, and I owe him nothing. Everything that's been done for me I've paid for — paid with hard labor." Again she spread her seamed hands out on her lap.

"But now," she said after a moment's silence, "now I'm not sure that I know how I'm going to school. It costs a lot, I suppose, and besides I've got to live. They let me stay on that ship. That's something, but it's a long way from any school, and besides ——"

"Wait," Florence broke in. "Let me tell you ——"

But just then Meg held up a warning finger. Loud and clear there rang out over the snow the midnight chimes.

"Midnight," whispered Florence, reaching out a hand for the bewitching bag.

CHAPTER XXIV

THREE QUESTIONS

"He's coming round all right." It was the house doctor of the hotel who spoke. Lucile was still bending over Patrick O'Hara. "He's regaining consciousness. It's only a scalp wound. A narrow squeak. An inch to the right, and it would have got him. He'd better go to the hospital for a little extra petting and patching, but he's in no danger — not the least. And as for your friend Laurie — he's got a bump on his head that'll do to hang his hat on for a day or two. But outside of perhaps a bit of a headache, he's O. K. Your friends are riding under a lucky star, I'd say."

"A lucky star," thought Lucile. Again she was free. Had the Lady of the Spirit of Christmas vanished? No. For once fortune was with her. As if facinated by the scene, the

lady still stood there, looking down at Patrick O'Hara.

Twenty seconds later this lady felt a tug at her arm as a girl in a low but excited whisper said: "You are the Spirit of Christmas."

"What?" the lady stared at her for a second, then a smile lighted her face. "Oh yes, why to be sure! So I am. In the excitement of the moment I had quite forgotten. Surely I am. So it is you who win? I am glad, so very, very glad! I do believe you recognized me five minutes ago, and that you've been working over that brave young policeman ever since, when I might easily have slipped away. What wonderful unselfishness! Here is the gold!"

Lucile felt a hard lump of something pressed into her hand and without looking down knew that it was ten double eagles. A warm glow crept over her.

"I did see you," she said, after murmuring her thanks, "but you see Patrick O'Hara was wounded trying to rescue a friend of mine. So how could I desert him for gold?"

"Yes, yes, how could you? Who was your friend?"

"Cordie."

"Oh! Cordie? Was she in danger?" the lady exclaimed excitedly. "Where is she? I must go to her at once!"

"Here! Here I am, Auntie!" cried an excited and tremulous young voice. The next moment little Cordie was enfolded in the arms of the Mystery Lady, Spirit of Christmas. And this lady was also Miss Diurno, the great virtuoso, and Cordie had called her Auntie!

* * * * * * * *

At exactly a half hour before midnight on this most exciting Christmas Eve, four people sat at a round table in the Butler House. There was a distinguished looking lady, a young man with a bump on his head that made his hair stand up in a circle, a young lady of college age, and a girl in her teens. They were the Mystery Lady, Laurie Seymour, Lucile and Cordie.

Ice cream and cakes had been served; coffee was on the way. Laurie had finished explain-

ing to Miss Diurno the ancient custom of some long forgotten land, that of answering, truthfully, three questions round.

"But Laurie, old dear," she protested, "why should I ask three questions of you? I already know far too much about you for my own good peace of mind; and as for Cordie, I fancy I know more about her than she knows about herself. I move we amend the custom a little. How would it do to allow our friend Lucile to ask all the questions — three around for each of us?"

"Oh! That would be darling!" exclaimed Lucile, fairly leaping from her chair. "You are all so very, very mysterious. There are so many, many things I'd like to know."

"Agreed!" exclaimed Laurie.

"I don't mind," smiled Cordie.

"Good. That's settled," said Miss Diurno, whose very greatness as a musician so affected Lucile that she found it very difficult to be her usual frank and friendly self. "Miss Lucile, you may have ten minutes for thinking up

questions. Then, over our coffee, we will answer them. But remember, only three questions, three around."

"Only three," Lucile whispered to herself. "And there is so much I want to know! So much I just *must* know!"

As she sat there, with her head all in a whirl, trying in vain to form the questions she wished to ask, one conviction was borne in upon her. She had been the center of a plot, a very friendly plot, she was sure of that, and one that had been entered into the truest of Christmas spirit. Cordie had known Miss Diurno all the time, in fact had only a short time ago called her Auntie. Miss Diurno had called Laurie by a familiar name — she had said "Old dear." She must have known him a long time. Then surely, to be a friend to such an one, he must be something rather great himself. And Cordie? She could scarcely be the simple little country girl she had thought her. Lucile's mind was in such a daze that when the great pianist tapped her wrist watch and said:

"Time's up. Who's the first?" she had not formed one question.

"Age before beauty," laughed Cordie.

"Well, that's me?" smiled Miss Diurno. "I am ready to be questioned."

"Why — er —" stammered Lucile. "Why did you, who are such a very great musician, undertake the humble task of assisting in a newspaper stunt?"

"Dear little girl," said Miss Diurno, a very mellow note of kindness creeping into her voice, "there are no great people in the world, and there are no truly humble tasks. All people who are truly great are also very humble. Tasks called humble by men may be truly great.

"But you have asked me a question. The reason I accepted that newspaper task was this: Marie Caruthers, my very best school chum and lifetime friend, went in for newspaper work. She was to have done the stunt, but just when the time came she was taken to the hospital. So I volunteered to take her place. And it was fun, heaps of it! Just imagine having the whole

city looking for you and yet to be walking in and out among the people every day and not a single one of them recognizing you at all.

"But there were times enough when I got into plenty of trouble. That night in the department store was a scream!"

"Not so much of a scream for me," grumbled Laurie. "I gave you my pass-out. Then after knocking nearly all the skin off my hand going down the bundle chute, I had to sleep in the basement, with corrugated paper for mattress and covers."

"Poor old Laurie!" smiled Miss Diurno. "But you deserved all you got. Think of the role you have been playing! Think! Just think!" laughed the pianist.

"You see," she said, turning to Lucile to explain her presence in the store that night, "I had promised to be in the store six hours that day. Then I allowed myself to become absorbed in some new music, and the first thing I knew it was getting late in the afternoon and my six hours not yet begun. Of course there

was nothing for it but to remain in the store after closing hours. I hid in that long narrow place, wedged myself between book shelves and stands, then stuck there until the clock struck ten.

"I hadn't realized that it would be hard to get out. When I did think of it I was terror-stricken. To think of remaining in that great vault of a store all night! Ugh! It gives me the shivers to think of it, even now. I haven't the least notion what I would have done if I hadn't come upon good old Laurie. He gave me his pass-out. You saw him do it. I knew this at the time, and I think you were a great little sport not to raise a big rumpus, especially after I took your coat."

"Why did you take my coat?" asked Lucile.

"I was afraid I couldn't get out in that fur cape. And besides, I wanted just such a coat as yours for the next day's stunt. So I traded with you. That was fair enough, wasn't it?"

"Traded? What do you mean?"

"Just what I said, just traded, and thanked

you for the opportunity. And now, my dear, that makes three questions."

"Three," Lucile cried excitedly. "Why no, I've only asked one."

"Leave it to the crowd," beamed the great little lady.

"Three! Three!" agreed Laurie and Cordie with one voice.

"Why — why then I shall be obliged to take up someone else."

"Heads I'm next, tails I'm not," said Laurie, tossing a coin in air. "Heads! I'm it. Do your worst."

"Who is Jefrey Farnsworth?" Lucile asked.

"See!" exclaimed Laurie. "See what I get into right away! Well, since it is Christmas Eve, I dare not tell a lie. I am forced to inform you that the only gentleman at this table was given that name at his birth."

"You — you are Jefrey Farnsworth?"

"Quite right."

"Be careful," warned Cordie, "You've used up two questions already."

Lucile was silent for a moment, then with a smile she said:

"Why did you take an assumed name, and who was Sam, and did he have anything to do with your selling books, and why were you afraid of him?"

"That business of hanging your question on a string is great stuff," laughed Laurie. "I recommend that you try it out on Cordie."

Then in a more sober tone, he said:

"You see it was this way: My publishers saw that my book was going to go across rather big and, since I was to benefit financially in its success, they thought it would be nice for me to have a part in making it a still greater — um —um, triumph. So they cooked up that idea about my speaking to ladies' clubs. I knew I couldn't do it, but I knew also that Sam would make me do it if I stuck around. Everyone does what Sam wants them to do; that is, they do if they stay where he is.

"So I said to myself, 'If I must help sell my books, I'll do it in a straightforward way

right over the counter. I'll get a job.' I did. And just so Sam couldn't find me and drag me away, I came to this city and took an assumed name.

"Sam's a sort of salesman for my publishers; that is, he sells books when he isn't promoting authors. When I saw him in the store that time I just naturally had to disappear.

"I think, though," he added, "that even Sam is satisfied. We sold two thousand copies of 'Blue Flames,' you and Donnie and Rennie and all the rest.

"As for my knowing the lady of the hour," he smiled, touching the arm of Miss Diurno, "I've known her for some time. And on some future lovely day in June, when my income has come to be half as much as hers, we're going to move into a certain lovely little vine covered cottage I know about and set up a nest all for ourselves."

"Good!" exclaimed Lucile. "Can't I come to see you?"

"My dear," said the great musician, "you

may come and live with us, both you and Cordie, live with us forever."

"Cordie, your turn to be questioned," said Laurie.

"Oh!" exclaimed Cordie, throwing her arms about Lucile and hiding her face in the folds of her dress. "I don't want you to ask me questions. I don't! I don't! I just want to confess how mean I have been and what an unkind trick I have played on you."

"Why Cordie!" Lucile consoled her. "You've not been mean to me at all. You — you've been the dearest kind of a little pal!"

"Oh, yes I have! I let you think I was a poor little girl from the country, when I wasn't at all. I allowed you to spend money on me and pay all the room rent when I just knew you thought you were going to have to live on milk toast all next term of school. And I never even offered to do my share at all.

"But if you only knew," she raced on, "how good it seemed to have one friend who wasn't one bit selfish, who didn't want a lot of things

for herself and who was willing to do things for other people when she really needed just plain ordinary things for herself. If you only knew! If you only did!" Cordie's voice rose shrill and high. She seemed about to burst into tears.

"There, there, dear little pal!" whispered Lucile. "I think I understand. But tell me, why did you take a job as wrapper when you really wasn't poor and didn't need the money?"

"Money!" laughed Cordie, now quite herself again. "I've never had to ask for any in my whole life! My father owns a third of that big store we worked in, and a lot besides."

"But Dick?" said Lucile.

"I rode Dick on my father's estate. It nearly broke my heart when they sold him. My father gave up his stables."

"But you haven't told me why you wanted to work in the store."

"Well, you see that day, the first day you ever saw me, just for fun I had dressed up in plain old fashioned clothes and had gone

downtown for a lark. Then I did that foolish fainting stunt. I really, truly fainted. And that man, that hawk-eyed man — " she shuddered, " must have recognized me. He must have known he could get a lot of money from father if only he could carry me away. Anyway he tried it and you — saved me! " She paused to give Lucile another hug.

" You are coming to my house for Christmas dinner, and I've kept track of everything in a little book and I'm going to pay you every cent, truly I am, and we'll have the best time.

" But I was going to tell you," she paused in her mad ramble, " I was —— "

" Listen! " Miss Diurno held up a hand for silence, " Cordie, someone is paging your name. Here! Over here! " she called to the bell boy.

" Telephone," said the boy.

The three sat in silence until Cordie returned.

" What do you think! " she exclaimed as she came bounding toward them. " It was James, my friend the bundle carrier at the phone.

They've worked fast. They raided the room of — of the hawk-eyed man and they found James' silver fox skins. And Auntie, I'm going to have father buy them as a present for you. Won't that be g-grand!"

"I should think it might," smiled her aunt, giving her arm an affectionate squeeze. "But, my dear, you hadn't finished telling Lucile."

"Oh! That's a short story now. When I saw how good and kind you were," Cordie said, turning to Lucile, "when I saw the work there was to do and everything, I was fascinated. I just wanted to play I was just what you thought me to be. So I called up my father and made him let me do it. That was all there was to it.

"But Auntie!" she exclaimed, turning to Miss Diurno. "Why did you steal my badge of serfdom?"

"Your what?"

"My badge of serfdom, the iron ring. In olden days serfs wore iron collars; now it's an iron ring."

"Oh, your iron ring!" laughed her aunt. "I needed it for my stunt. But here it is; you may have it and welcome, diamond and all."

"I shall keep you ever and always," murmured the girl, pressing the ring to her lips. "I shall cherish you in memory of a grand and glorious adventure."

"Of course you understood," said Miss Diurno, turning to Lucile, "that you are to keep the fur lined cape."

"No, I——"

"Oh yes, you must! It was the one extravagance that I made the paper pay for. I traded with you, and have lost yours, so there is really no other way out. Besides," her voice softened, "I want you to accept it as a gift from me, a little token of appreciation for your many kindnesses to my little niece."

Lucile's head was in a whirl. She found herself unable to think clearly of all her good fortune. A great musician, an author, and a very rich girl for her friends; a magnificent cape of midnight blue and fox skin, and two

hundred dollars in gold! Merry Christmas! What a Christmas it would be indeed!

"Listen," whispered Miss Diurno. From some distant room there came the slow, sweet chimes of a clock.

"Striking midnight," she whispered. Then from far and near there came the clanging of church bells.

"Christmas morning!" exclaimed Miss Diurno, springing to her feet. "Merry, Merry Christmas to all!"

"Merry Christmas! Merry Christmas!" they chorused in return.

CHAPTER XXV

WHAT THE BROWN BAG HELD

At the precise moment that the four companions in the great city hotel rose to offer each other their Christmas greetings, Florence and Meg stood over the fascinating bag which had cost Florence so much worry and trouble. As Florence felt in her purse for the key she found herself wondering for the hundredth time what it might contain.

"Christmas, my Christmas secret," she whispered. Then, as she felt the key within her grasp, she turned resolutely to the task. Although she had looked forward to this hour with pleasure, now it seemed to hold something of a feeling of fear. She was opening a bag which had belonged to another. What might it not contain?

With trembling fingers she broke the seal

which had so long and faithfully hidden the secret. Then, with a steadier hand, she inserted the key.

For a full moment after that she stood there in silence. She was saying to herself over and over again: "There is nothing, nothing, nothing in there that I shall care for. Nothing, nothing, nothing."

Thus fortified against disappointment, she at last turned the key, pulled the flap and threw the bag wide open.

The first look brought a glimpse of a bit of negligee. Nothing so exciting in this.

"Well anyway," sighed Florence, "it — wasn't a man's bag. It could not have belonged to that — that man."

"No," said Meg, "it couldn't."

One by one Florence removed the few articles of clothing that had been packed in the bag. These were of fine texture and well made. But beneath these was something to bring an exclamation to her lips.

Putting out her hand, she lifted to view a

roll of silk cloth, of royal blue, and of such thinness and fineness as she had seldom seen in all her life.

"Yards and yards of it," she breathed, throwing it before her in bright, billowy waves.

"And look!" cried Meg. "Batik!"

It was true; beneath the silk was a bolt of batik. This Meg took to the light and examined it with great care.

"It's genuine," she whispered at last. "Not the sham stuff that is made in American factories, but the kind that dark faced women dye with great skill and much labor, dipping again and again in colors such as we know nothing of."

Florence examined the cloth, then spread it over the back of a chair. Then she sat down. There was a puzzled look on her face.

"It's very beautiful," she mused. "One could not hope to buy a more perfect present, sight unseen, but I'm wondering why a man should be willing to trace me down at infinite pains and then follow me in the face of danger and in the teeth of a storm for the sake of getting posses-

sion of two rolls of cloth. That seems strange."

"Does seem odd," said Meg. "But wait! Here's something else." She drew two long pasteboard tubes from the bottom of the bag.

"What do you suppose?" whispered Florence. Inserting one finger in the first tube she twisted it about, then began drawing it out. A roll of papers appeared.

"Papers," she whispered. "Probably important papers; deeds, stocks and bonds, perhaps."

Imagine her surprise when, having drawn the papers out and partly unrolled them, she found them to be pictures.

"Pictures!" she exclaimed in disgust. "And only printed pictures at that."

"But such wonderful pictures!" exclaimed Meg, holding one out to view.

It was indeed a wonderful picture, one of those vague, misty things that came out of the great war. This one was of a smoke clouded cannon in the foreground, belching black smoke and fire, and in the midst of the smoke, form-

ing herself out of it, a most beautiful black-haired woman, her eyes burning, her hands clawing, leaping straight at the enemy.

"It *is* a wonderful picture," said Florence when they had gazed at it in silence for a time. "But after all, it is only a print, and can't be worth much. I still don't see ——"

"Tell you what," Meg broke in, "let's unroll them all and weight them down on the floor with books so we can have a good look."

"Good idea," said Florence, beginning to unroll one.

It was truly a remarkable collection of pictures which at length carpeted the floor. War pictures, all of them, and all displaying that strong spiritual interpretation which was so common in pictures of those times. A French airplane falling in flames and beneath it an angel waiting to bear away the soul of the brave aviator; the American flag drifting in the clouds and seen from afar by a French soldier in the trenches; such were the themes.

"Don't you think they're grand?" said Meg.

"Yes," Florence responded, "but after all, they are only prints of the work of some great master. 'Veny LeCarte'" she read at the bottom of one. "I believe, yes, they're all by the same man."

For some time they sat there in silence. They were at last about to rise when there came a light rap at their door.

"Let me in," came from outside. "I saw the light in the room as I was passing and thought I'd come up to say 'Good morning and Merry Christmas.'" It was Lucile.

"Merry Christmas yourself," exclaimed Florence, throwing wide the door. "Come in."

"This is Meg, Lucile; and Meg, that's Lucile," she smiled.

"But Florence, where in the world did you get those marvelous etchings?" exclaimed Lucile after she shook hands with Meg. "And why do you carpet your floor with them? I nearly stepped on one."

"Etch — etchings!" stammered Florence. "They're mine — at least I bought them."

"Bought them! You? You bought them!" Lucile stared incredulous. Then, bending over, she read the name at the bottom of one. After that her eyes roved from picture to picture.

"Veny LeCarte," she murmured as if in a dream. "And she says she bought them!" She dropped weakly into a chair.

"Florence," she said at last, "do you know who Veny LeCarte was?"

"N-o."

"Well, I'll tell you. He was one of the most famous artists of France. He made etchings of the war. No one could surpass him. And unlike his fellow artists, who allowed a hundred copies to be made from each plate, he allowed but twenty. Then the plates were destroyed. He made these pictures. You have nearly all of them. And then he went away to the war, and was killed.

"Since that time his etchings have been much prized and have brought fabulous prices. Oh, Florence, tell me how you got them! Surely, surely you didn't buy them!"

"I did," said Florence unsteadily, hardly knowing whether to laugh or cry, "but I bought them in a strange way. I'll tell you about it." Then she told Lucile the whole story.

"And those pictures," she said at the end, "are the reason that man dogged my footsteps. It had not been his bag. He had not owned the pictures, but some way he had learned that the pictures were in this bag. He had meant to buy the bag, but arrived too late."

The hour was late. What did that matter? To-morrow was Christmas. Florence set about brewing some cocoa, and over the cups the girls engaged in such a talk fest as they had not enjoyed for months. Everything that had happened to Lucile during those eventful weeks, from the first night to the last, had to be told. The wonderful cape, with its white fox collar, must be displayed. The gold coins must be jingled and jangled. Meg's story must be told all over again.

After that, problems yet unsolved must be

discussed. Was the hawk-eyed man who had attempted to gain possession of Florence's bag the same one who had attempted to kidnap Cordie?

"That question," said Lucile to Florence, "can only be setteld by you going down to the police station and looking at him."

"In that case, it will never be answered," said Florence, with a shudder.

Would a romance spring up between the rich girl Cordie and the gallant young policeman, Patrick O'Hara? Who could tell? So the conversation rambled on until early morning. At last Lucile hurried away and Meg and Florence prepared for three winks.

As Florence, with Meg by her side, was drifting off to sleep, she heard Meg say:

"To-morrow I must go back to the ship."

"Indeed you'll not," she roused up to protest. "You'll stay right here to-morrow and every day. And you're going to school, too. I need you to guard all my — my treasure."

How the pictures came to be in the bag

which Florence had purchased at the sale, will probably always remain a secret. Perhaps the one who left the bag did not realize the value of the etchings. Who knows what may have been the reason? But they were truly valuable, and Florence learned this for certain on the following Monday. Later she sold them to a dealer for a good round sum. This money went far, not only to smooth the road to her own education, but to enable her to give Meg many a lift along the way.

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The Crimson Thread

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